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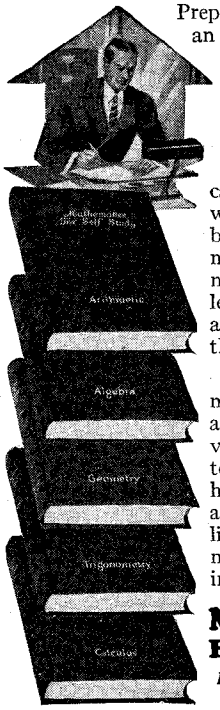

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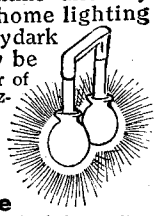

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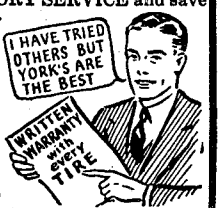

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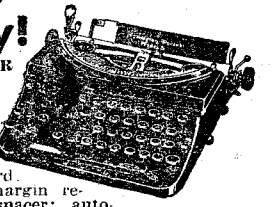

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Action Stories of Every Variety

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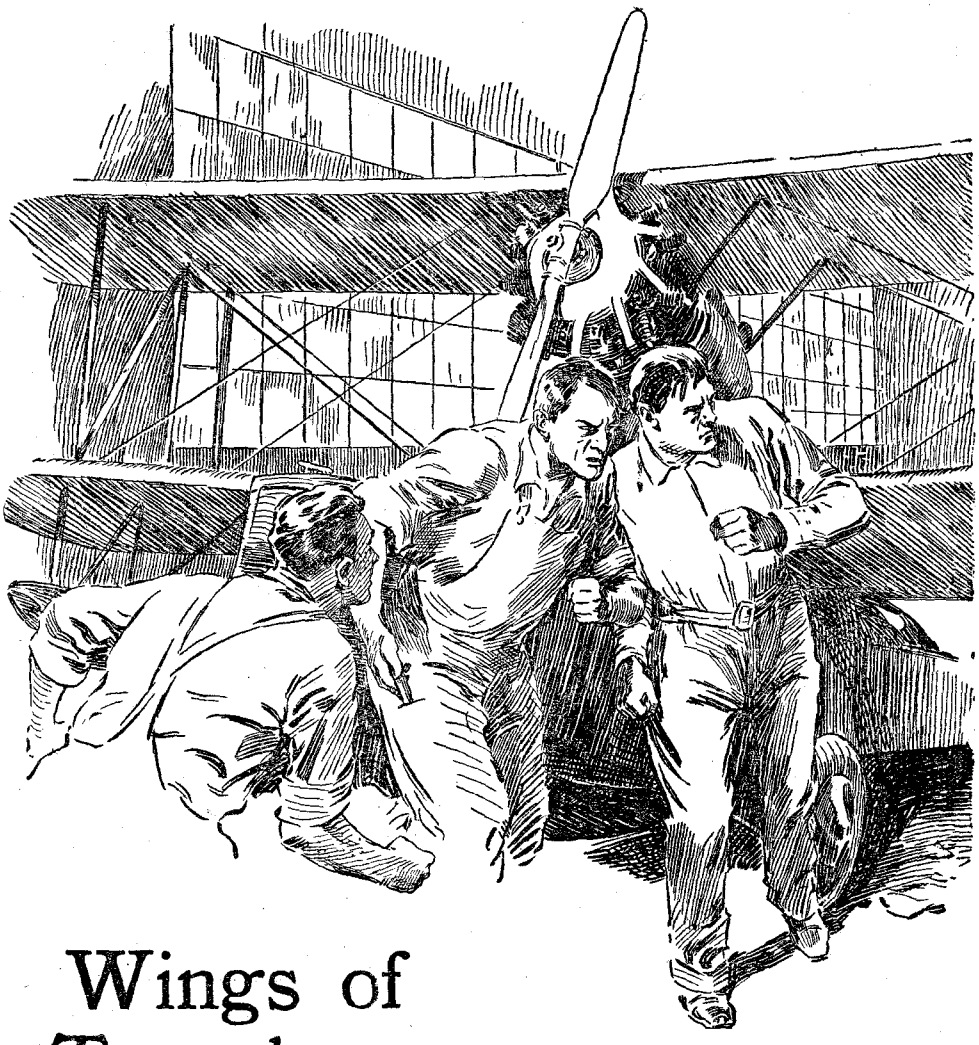

Wings of Treachery

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

Author of "The Winged Jinx," "Hell Island," etc.

Hard-boiled Stu Holt air chauffeur to a movie actress —that was a laugh—but the murderous scheme that prompted it wasn't funny at all

CHAPTER I.

TOO BEAUTIFUL.

IT was enough just to be around her. Enough, I mean, to be in charge of her flying equipment and to know I could see her three or four times a day. And all the time I was hating myself for it. Hating myself with a gathering hatred that curdled my blood and rotted my bones. Why, I would ask myself a dozen times during a sleepless night, couldn't I smack

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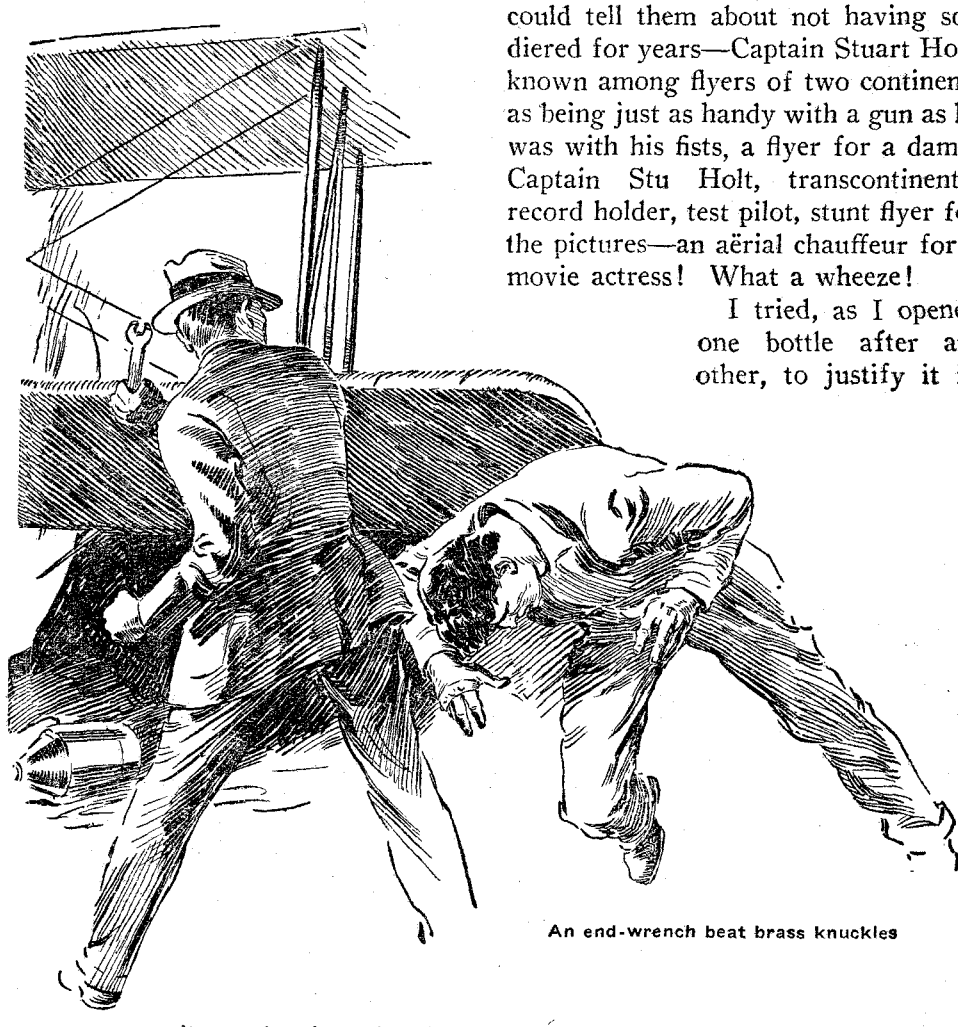

An end-wrench beat brass knuckles

her on the jaw, heave her into the plane and take her away somewhere, not caring whether she liked it or not, and not caring that she was worth a million dollars or so. God knows I was hard enough with men. Why couldn't I be hard with Gail Wilson?

I remember the night the blow-up came, the night before the floors of a certain house in the mountains shone redly with the blood of dead and dying men. Tossing restlessly on my bed, I got a true picture of myself there in the bitter darkness. Captain—they still call me captain in spite of all I could tell them about not having soldiered for years—Captain Stuart Holt, known among flyers of two continents as being just as handy with a gun as he was with his fists, a flyer for a dame! Captain Stu Holt, transcontinental record holder, test pilot, stunt flyer for the pictures—an aërial chauffeur for a movie actress! What a wheeze!

I tried, as I opened one bottle after another, to justify it in my own mind. How could I quit the job when I was getting a grand a month, and when Johnny Clark needed every cent of it to repair the Thunderbolt before the next National Air Races? How could I leave Gail Wilson until I learned exactly what kind of a racket they were running on her in that big ranch house in San Fernando Valley? How could I put my mind to anything until I knew exactly who put that drop of acid on the flipper controls of the Thunder-

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bolt? And what, in God's name, was I going to do about loving Gail Wilson so? I, who had used up all my luck, hopelessly in love with America's No. 1 Sweetheart, the girl whose name in electric lights always pulled a full house, from Broadway to Main Street!

It sounded like a gag, all right, but I could not get a laugh out of it. Not even after the third bottle. An aërial wet nurse for a movie star—nuts!

But maybe we'd better do an Immelmann and glide back to the take-off so you will know how the damned thing started.

"TWENTY-FIVE dollars," the judge said. "Next case."

The next case was mine, and I knew the judge would give me the business, so I had my five fins ready. The girl ahead of me, who had just been told to put her twenty-five dollars on the line, was d i g g i n g into her pocketbook. She pulled out three or four crumpled bills. That, it appeared, was all she had. So I paid her fine cheerfully, because she was so beautiful. Stuart Sir Galahad Holt, that was me, and in Hollywood, mind you, where you have only to shake a tree and four platinum blondes will fall out!

"Twenty-five dollars," the judge said, when the cop told him how he had tapped me on Ventura doing sixty. "Next case."

So I dug out a twenty and a five and figured on fading fast before I got really big-hearted. I twitched the sleeve of the red-necked cop who had pinched me.

"Come out to Valley Field sometime, sweetheart," I said, pleasantly, "and I'll give you a couple of thick ears."

His expression cheered me immensely, and I turned away. The girl with the big blue eyes was waiting beside me. I was astonished. She had made a cool profit of twenty-five and I had expected her to be at least two blocks away by now. I looked at her and even my jaundiced eyes warmed at the sight of her loveliness. Oh, I realized that she was in the pictures, but that did not matter at the time. Having had to hang around the lots while I was doing crashes for Colossal, I had no illusions about talent. And I can take my movies or let them alone, except for the news reels. So I did not recognize Gail Wilson.

"That was too sweet of you, Captain Holt," she said, in that queer contralto voice which has probably caused your heart to turn over a hundred times. "I'll have to drive you to the bank to get some money. Mind coming along?"

I was not exactly surprised that she had recognized me. My pictures had been in the papers a lot after those three last crashes at the Apex factory. Especially after I had been arrested for popping the chief engineer on the nose for designing wings which would fall off if you scratched yourself at thirty thousand feet. But I was surprised to know that my twenty-five was coming home to papa.

When we walked out of the door, I realized that I was with a celebrity. The autograph hounds were out in full force, with notebooks and pens in hand.

"Oh, Miss Wilson," they brayed, "won't you give me your autograph?"

And then, being literate and able to read the papers, I knew who she was. Remember how she looked in "Sunrise," with her red-gold hair curled so she did not appear a day over sixteen? Johnny Clark and I had seen that pic-

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ture on the Mosquito Coast and Johnny had pasted a newspaper photo of her up on our barracks wall and had practically sung hymns to it for months. Odd, that I shouldn't have recognized her at once. But after you've been in Hollywood a while you get to thinking that when you've seen one blonde you've seen them all.

HER car was English, and a block long. It was a roadster, and when she shouldered through the crowd and slipped behind the big rakish wheel she hardly looked big enough to drive it.

"Come on, Captain," she said, "get in."

I did get in, and I looked at her curiously as we moved out into the traffic. I was thinking of those days in the hot countries, where all the girls had olive skins and would soon have mustaches. This Gail Wilson had the most beautiful skin I have ever seen, and there was a cocky little tilt to her nose, and her lips were very bright as they smiled at me.

"Well, well," I drawled, "just fancy meeting the famous Gail Wilson, in person!"

She did not like the way I said it, and her cheeks flamed crimson. She whirled in at the curb and jammed on her brakes.

"Get out!" she snapped.

"What about my twenty-five?" I asked, grinning.

"I'll send you a check."

"Thanks," I said, dryly. "But if you don't mind, I'll take the cash."

She lifted her foot from the clutch and we leaped ahead, to the enthusiastic displeasure of a cab driver, whose crash-dented fender we missed by a good half inch. He pulled up beside us and invited Gail Wilson to practice her driving in the open country. When I offered to stop the car and to bite his nose off with his own teeth, he shifted gears and hurried away, muttering. Miss Wilson looked at me, and there was a certain frank curiosity in her deep blue eyes, but she said nothing. I could see, however, that she was still a little upset in her mind. It must have been a long time since anyone had said no to her about anything.

We boiled up Vine, nearly took the toes off the traffic cop at Hollywood Boulevard and came to a stop in front of the bank building. Paying no attention to the forbidden red curbing, Miss Wilson parked directly before the door. The traffic officer gave me the eye, then inspected the car. Recognizing it, he discreetly turned his back. The power, combined, of money and beauty!

Miss Wilson came out with a wad of nice new money big enough to gag a shark. She was just peeling off my twenty-five when a man came dashing out of the bank. It was Clunk Slosson, fat, sleek and, as always, sweating.

"Gail!" he panted. "Gail, I just got an offer to—" His bulging brown eyes fell on me, and narrowed. "Oh—ah—hello, Stu!" he said, a little lamely.

He had never called me Stu, even in those days when I did not mind playing poker with him in Tampico. I felt like repeating my last act with him, booting him where it would do the most good.

He had won nearly a grand from the outfit before we discovered the mirror which told him just what our hole cards were.

"Still out of jail, eh, Slosson?" I said, sweetly.

Oh, I knew he was in Hollywood, all

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right. That crack was just because I did not want him calling me Stu. He was a big shot in Hollywood, now. I just had not happened to run into him. He was a business agent for talent. And his house in the mountains, I had understood, had been the subject for several police calls, what with rough parties and one thing and another. He eyed me for an instant, then chose to laugh.

"Ha-ha, Stu," he said. "Always gagging, eh?"

"Yeah," I said, carelessly. "My stomach turns over easily, nowadays."

HIS face was still smiling, but his popping brown eyes were not smiling at all. They were hating me just as they had hated me when I had frisked him in Mexico to find the money he had taken from my flyers.

"I got some business to talk, Gail," he said, showing a couple of extra gold teeth in an effort to prove he was perfectly happy about everything. "Can you come up to the office?"

"Tomorrow," she said, casually, and reached for the switch key.

Before he could say anything else, she nosed the car out into the traffic. Was this Slosson bird, I wondered, managing her affairs?

Where the carrion is, you find the vultures gathered. It was in my mind to ease out of the car, go back and give Slosson a back-hand bust on the snoot just for luck.

"Where do you live?" Gail Wilson asked. "I'll drop you off at your house."

"Take me back to court, then," I said, grinning. "I left my car there when I came with you."

She blinked, and for a moment or two I thought she would put me out then and there. Instead, as we turned left off the Boulevard, she touched my sleeve with a white-gloved hand.

"What are you doing now, Captain?" she asked.

"Riding with a star, and liking it."

She scowled, then. "You're all the same, aren't you?" she said. "From what I'd heard about you, I thought you were different."

"Oh, you mean in a business way?" I countered. "I'm building a racing ship with a buddy of mine. Going to test it this afternoon."

"I thought you were doing crashes for Colossal."

"I was. But air stuff is out this week. They're making Lady G-men or something. Next week they'll be doing something else and maybe, the week after, they'll have some necks to break and I'll get a job."

She thought that over a moment or two, her clear young profile unbelievably lovely.

Then "How," she asked, "would you like to work for me? I have two Apex planes, you know. An amphibian and a two-seater."

"Yeah," I said, without enthusiasm, "I know. And next week it'll be a stable of polo ponies."

Her violet eyes grew stormy. "You're being disagreeable," she snapped. "Any special reason?"

"Uh huh," I said, calmly. "I'm not going to join the chorus of yes-men, that's all. Every now and then somebody has to say no for the good of your soul. But the fact of the matter is, I don't especially like the idea of being a flying chauffeur. I've done a lot of things in my time, and had a lot of jobs, but so far, they've always been strictly men's jobs."

"I know that," she said, nodding her bright head. "I keep fairly well up

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with flying news. But wouldn't you be interested at a thousand a month?"

I STARED at her. "Are you paying Gus Wasey that?"

"No. I'm paying him eight. Why do you speak his name like that? Do you know him?"

"Sure, I know him. He keeps his racing plane at Valley Field. I've known him for years."

"So you don't care for him," she said. "I can tell by your voice."

"I don't like the perfume he uses," I said. "He smells like Slosson."

"That's funny," she mused. "Clunk Slosson handles my business affairs. He hired Wasey for me."

"So?" I said. There was room for thought in that. I'm not too choosey, myself, but I wouldn't have wanted Slosson to hire anybody for me, not even on a sewer-digging job. But this Wasey bird: now and then you run across a guy who makes your back hair lift just to look at him. I felt that way about Gus Wasey, and a lot of other flyers did, too. He was a fairish speed flyer, but had never muscled into the heavy money at the races. Exactly how he made his living was always a mystery to most of us. I remembered he had collected twenty grand from an oil company dizzy enough to want to see its name on a ship that would hop from Roosevelt Field to Rome. Wasey's apple box had the oil company's name on it, all right, but it never hopped higher than you could throw a rhinoceros by the beak. Wasey was like that.

"Well," I said to Gail Wilson, "I hate to see Wasey earning eight grand a year when a lot of good guys in the flying game are wearing cardboard soles in their shoes."

"So do I," she said quietly.

I spread my palms out hopelessly. "That anyone should have to tell you what to do!" I murmured.

"Will you take his place?" she asked, flatly.

I'll admit that the idea of a grand a month looked good because Johnny Clark and I had been spending our money freely, much too freely, on our racing job, the Thunderbolt. But I hadn't come to the point, yet, where I wanted to be an air jockey for a girl. And there was something else that made me shy away. Something deep down in me, a hunch, maybe, that warned me not to bite off anything that would be tough chewing. A nameless instinct which we flyers depend upon instead of our brains told me that there would be trouble in that job, and I was getting to an age where I had had a bellyful of trouble and was not looking for more.

"Thanks, sister," I said as we swerved to the curb before the police court, "but I'm pretty busy nowadays. But mother and the girls will be proud to know you asked me!"

I bowed deeply as I stepped out. I could tell by the whine of her gears that she was mad again. But that was all right. It would do her good to be mad once in a while. She had no right to be so beautiful.

CHAPTER II.

CRASH LANDING.

ONLY a damned fool would have ridden that whirling plane down for more than a few thousand feet. Then, very thankfully, he would have stepped off into space and yanked at the release ring.

But I did not bail out. I was just that much of a damned fool. Through nine thousand feet of screaming, whirl-

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ing, up-rushing air I rode my ship down. And all the time I was trying patiently, carefully, to save whatever minute fraction might be left of thirty-six thousand dollars.

Half my brain, painstakingly remembering every fragment of flying experience I had gained through ten thousand hours in the air, was busy attempting one thing after another trying to stop that wicked spin. The other half was exulting that no other racing ship in my experience would have held her wings this long. A flying engine, she was, with just enough lifting surface to hold her in the air. A lethal bullet of a ship; visiting pilots would look at her and shake their heads. A better plane to die in than most, they would say. And they would solemnly clasp hands with Johnny Clark and me, telling us we had invented a better killing machine than Dr. Guillotine.

But I had not been afraid of her. I had spent too many hours over her curves. I had flown anything and everything the factories had wanted tested, so why should I have been afraid of my own baby? And when I had taken her up she had flown like a winged bullet, had maneuvered like a hawk. Only one thing that Johnny and I had not counted upon. It had never occurred to either of us that the flipper controls might let go.

Down, down we hurtled, that new plane and I, with the pointer on the altimeter biting huge chunks out of the figures on the dial. The earth, an incredible green merry-go-round, was expanding with astonishing speed. San Fernando Valley was a rising bowl of lush verdure, surrounded by a spinning ribbon of mountains at the edges.

One at a time I went through all the tricks I knew for stopping a spin. It was time, I told myself, grimly, to get well or do something. I had closed the throttle and centered the stick. Now I threw the full weight of my heavy body against r u d d e r and ailerons, pressing them hard against the perimeter of the whirling circle. The increased vibration of the entire plane threatened to tear the whole structure apart in mid-air.

There was just one thing left to do. And by the time I should discover this to be useless, the plane and I, together, would have plowed deep into the ground like a plunging meteor.

I reached out and gave the engine full throttle. I had thought the falling ship had almost reached the uttermost limit of downward speed, and I was unprepared for the instantaneous yank of nine hundred horsepower adding its might to the pull of gravity. No chance to do anything now but to ride all the way down. If I attempted to push myself up out of the narrow cockpit the wind, howling over the windscreen, would break my neck against the edge of the headrest.

SO I just sat there, every nerve fiber in me tautly awaiting some sign that the pounding engine might lift the bow of the plane—and in time. For a long, heart-stopping span of instants I was conscious of no change.

And then, in the next split-second I knew that—given time—the engine would do the job. But time was one thing I did not have. So this, then, was the end. Might as well be this way as any. At least if there was to be a fire I would not know it, which was something. Too bad, I told myself grimly, that old Horowitz, the director of Colossal, was not here to catch the crash all the way down. He had always been fussy about crashes.

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I could see him now, fussing as the whirring camera covered me on the way down, and regretting that there would be no chance for retakes. Too bad, too, that Gail Wilson couldn't be around to emote, profile to the lens, over the hole in the ground that would shortly be me. What a bang the dear public would get out of a rush like that!

Suddenly faint hope stirred in me. The terrific pull of the engine was lifting the bow more swiftly. But so was the ground lifting. Now I could see that it would be a matter of scant feet. A few feet too much and I'd plow up a divot big enough to sink Gail's Rolls Royce. A few feet short and I'd pancake down to a belly-flop that would probably kill me just as swiftly as a headlong dive.

I reached down to cut the switch. The vast carpet of earth leaped for the swooping ship. Now the bow was almost level—but not quite. Hangars flashed past the wing tip. A big tin transport at the runway of the Administration Building was a quick silver blur. Well, I had done my best. I braced my forearm against the padded cowling and waited.

It would be nice to say I jockeyed her down to a perfect landing. But the pilot who could have landed a flipperless racer at something like 300 miles an hour would be a better flyer than I've ever known, and I've known the best in the world in my time.

I felt the jar as the wheels struck the grass, just a little off the proper angle. I felt the oleos give, felt the whole undercarriage sweep off and crash away behind us. The propeller, dipping, wound itself into a knot of metal. The underbelly of the plane touched the earth and ricocheted like a flat stone on a millpond.

My hands and feet worked without conscious commands from my brain. We careened upward in a wild bounce, skipping over a good hundred feet of tarmac before we touched and bounced again. Wood crumpled, metal sheared. I was all set for the cartwheel that would end everything, but my hands and feet were working faster than I knew.

And then I was sitting in the cockpit amid abysmal silence. I was half-dazed from the buffeting, stunned with the overwhelming sense of my own good luck. Another crash, another escape; how long would this sort of thing go on? Was there no limit to my fund of luck?

The crash siren from the tower cut into my consciousness. The meat wagon, with mechanics hanging to step, mudguards and rear bumper, raced across the grass and slued to a stop beside me.

JOHNNY CLARK, a fire extinguisher in his hand, was first to gallop across the dozen intervening feet of turf. His thin, sensitive face was ashy gray and his blue eyes were expanded with fright. I pulled myself up over the cockpit wall just as he reached the side of the ship.

"Sorry, Johnny," I said. "The flipper leads went on the second turn of that spin."

Color was coming back into his face. His quick, intent gaze travelled swiftly over me, looking for signs of damage. Finding none, he dragged out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and shook one loose for me.

"It's oke, big boy," he said with a long, hissing sigh of relief. "But you had me almost worried for a few minutes."

Mechanics who had swarmed around

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the plane, stepped aside so that Johnny and I could inspect the damage. They were considerately silent, letting Johnny and me make our own appraisals. Everyone at the field knew how long we had worked to d e s i g n and to build this racing plane, and we had never been coy about admitting that we had invested our last blue chip in it. Hard-boiled and cynical these men were, but I knew that Johnny and I could have passed the hat around at that moment and not one of them would have failed to drag out his last dime to toss into it.

A motor car whirled up to our tight little circle of silent men. Incuriously I looked around. It was Gus Wasey, Gail Wilson's pilot. I remembered that he kept his low-wing racing job at Valley Field. A good job it was, too, and if he couldn't think of an easier way to make the money, he was not unlikely to romp home with the bacon at the next National Air Races. Johnny and I had given many an hour of anxious consideration to Wasey's snub-nosed Comet.

"Well, well!" he said, joining us beside the wreck. "Had you saying your prayers, didn't it?"

I did not answer him. There was something about Gus Wasey that always made me ugly right away. He was big—almost as big as I was—and a trifle too good looking in a sleek way. Always, you felt, it would be wise to keep your hand on your bankroll when he was around. Yet barring the transatlantic fiasco, which had been none too fragrant, you could not put your finger on anything he had done and say, "There, that mug is a two-timing crook."

"Too bad," he said with smug condescension. "But it's a good thing you found out she was unstable before you got into my slipstream at the Miami Races."

Johnny Clark straightened up. His mobile face froze as he stared icily at the bigger man.

"Any time we get into your wash at a race," he snapped, "you can have the ship. And that's a promise. She'll be ready for the races."

THE little group of mechanics turned away from their contemplation of the wreck. They listened with frank interest. Gus Wasey was not popular among the men who, at one time or another, had worked on his plane.

"A little on the boastful side," Gus Wasey said, flushing a bit as he gazed into Johnny's chill eyes.

Johnny, tall and slender and arrogant, got himself set. I could see that the reaction from his scare was setting in and that a little physical action right now would be to his liking.

"Easy, Johnny," I said, moving up.

Wasey had seen Johnny's fists tighten up. He was half a head taller and a good forty pounds heavier. He was grinning down at Johnny's quick anger, but now he looked at me. Whatever he saw in my face took the fight out of him. He shrugged carelessly and turned back to his car.

"I suggest," he said, getting in, "that you get a good designer to lay out a safe ship for you."

Johnny took a quick step toward him, but Wasey's car jumped ahead and the spinning tires kicked clods of turf back into our faces.

"Some day," Johnny said, slowly, "I'm going to tie that mug's neck into a lover's knot. I don't like him. I've never liked him since he refused to take his ship up to look for little Pete Newcomb. Remember?"

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But I had ceased to pay attention. Oddly, I was thinking about Gail Wilson. Imagine a lug like Wasey being around her all the time! But still, it was not my worry. Half the troubles in life come from worrying about something that is not one's own business. And I had plenty of troubles of my own right now.

"All right," I said, tiredly, "let's get this ship into the hangar and find out how much it is going to cost to fix her up."

CHAPTER III.

THE NEW JOB.

I SLAPPED the telephone receiver down on its hook, walked over to the buffet and poured myself a four-finger slug of Bourbon. I tossed it down and was just going to work on another when Johnny came into the apartment.

"Here's the list," he said. "I've been working on it all day. Every part we need to get the plane into shape for the Miami races. Want to see it?"

"No," I said. "What's the whole job going to cost?"

Johnny ran his slim fingers through his crisp dark hair. He hated to tell me. Well, I hated to hear it. I had been thinking about it most of the day.

"About seven grand," Johnny said.

I stared at him for a moment, then poured myself another drink. I walked to the window which, eight stories in the air, opened upon a magnificent view of Hollywood and Los Angeles. Weariness flooded over me like a tidal wave.

"How much money have you, Johnny?" I asked him, still looking down at the endless string of cars crawling along Hollywood Boulevard.

"A couple of hundred," Johnny said.

I laughed mirthlessly. "Isn't that a gag?" I said. "Since you and I have been teaming together we've made seventy-five or eighty thousand between us. Maybe more. You have a couple of hundred left. And my bank balance shows three hundred and something."

"What's the use of saving in this racket?" Johnny asked, carelessly. "You crash and what good does the unspent money do you?"

"I suppose that's it," I said. "But somewhere we've got to dig up seven grand—and our living expenses—to save the thirty-six thousand that's already in her."

No great concern showed in Johnny's disillusioned face. It was his philosophy to live along from day to day, unworried about what might happen on the morrow. He had been like that since I first met him, down in the Amazon country, four years before. He had been only twenty-four then, yet he was already a confirmed disbeliever in happy endings. And even then he had that remoteness in his blue eyes that comes to people who have looked death in the face so often that life, itself, has ceased to have much value.

Together we had flown in the Gran Chaco mess until a general began to put our pay in his own pockets. And between us had quietly grown a friendship that was as deep and as constant as only a friendship between two wanderers can be.

What Johnny had been before I met him I could only guess, for he never mentioned his past except by some vaguely oblique reference. But he had come from a wealthy family, had received an excellent technical education and had learned to fly abroad, where he

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appeared to have spent most of his youth. The latter I judged only by the fact that when we came back to the States none of the flying gang knew him despite the fact that his work in the air indicated many a long hour behind the stick in all sorts of ships. But I never asked him questions. His past was his own, and I was quite content to leave it like that.

"WE'LL dig up the money somehow," he said, helping himself to a drink.

"Listen, Johnny," I said. "Just before you came in, I was talking on the telephone to Sam Greene, of the Intercontinental Airways. I figured maybe we could get jobs flying their big ships until we had earned enough jack to get the Thunderbolt fixed up. But the net of it is they don't want us. They admit that we've forgotten more about flying than a lot of their youngsters will ever know. But what they are hiring out of their long waiting list are young pilots who will do what they're told and who can take—and like—discipline. They don't want old-timers, and they don't want stunt flyers. They say we just would not fit in. In other words, the answer was '*No.*'"

"I hope you told him," Johnny said calmly, as he poured himself another drink, "to go straight to hell."

"No. He was nice enough. Even offered to lend us anything up to five Gs, personally. But no job. Not at any price. And while I am telling you this, I may as well tell you that I went over to see the Trans-Pacific people. I used to know Ed Simpson. He ended up by offering us both jobs as junior pilots, after assuring me that it was because he had known us down in the hot countries. It was their policy, he said, to do their own training. Imagine that! Us, junior pilots, riding beside mugs who were wearing didies while we were flying Jennies. He was sorry, but that was the best he could do. Orders from New York."

"Here's to sin," Johnny said, holding his glass aloft. "How about crashing a few crates for the pictures?"

"No air pictures being shot just now," I said.

"The day of stunt men," Johnny mused, emptying the bottle and looking in the bar for a new one, "is about over. We've had a swell time, but we've had our fling." He swayed a little. I guessed he had stopped for a couple of quick ones on the way in from Valley Field. "How about Central America?"

"No wars down there now."

"I know a nice little racket just across the border. We could clean up for four or five grand pretty fast."

"Dope?" I asked, sharply.

"Japs."

"That's out."

"Oh, I don't know," he drawled. "We've got to have some jack."

"We don't need it that badly."

"Exactly what," he said, evenly, "would prevent me from running aliens if I wanted to?"

"I would, Johnny."

He took a long drink and eyed me over the rim of the glass. "No, Stu, not if I made up my mind."

"You're drunk!" I snapped.

"Maybe, but when I need a guardian I'll let you know."

"You won't have to, Johnny. I'll know without your telling me. And when you talk about running aliens, you're not far from it."

And then, to my infinite relief, the telephone rang sharply. I answered it. It was Muggs Feeney, who was dismantling our ship at the hangar.

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"Listen, boss," he said over the wire, "I just found somepin. I was taking the busted flipper leads out and somepin burned my finger. It was acid, boss. Some louse put a drop of acid on the braided wire and it et right through whilst you was in the air."

I took a long breath. A red flame of anger leaped before my eyes.

"There's a century note, Muggs," I said, "for anybody who takes me to the man who did it. We'll be right out."

TWO afternoons later I was driving out Ventura when a Rolls Royce roadster purred past me. That was a surprise. Very few cars pass me when I am going places. And it was a girl who was driving. A girl with hair the color of freshly minted gold. She swung in front of me, lifted a white gloved hand and forced me to the shoulder of the road. I got out and walked ahead to Gail Wilson's car.

"I've been trying to telephone you all day," she said, and swung the door open.

I got into the car and looked not at her but at the busy highway ahead. It was too disturbing to look at her. She made you forget that she was an actress. You found yourself thinking how wonderful it would be if the emotions which played across her lovely face might be real, and you began to forget that sometime along the hard and bitter course of your life you had fumbled things, and—Oh, well, if you have ever seen Gail Wilson on the screen, you'll understand.

"Trying to telephone me?" I repeated, dumbly. "Why?"

"I heard about your accident. And I figured perhaps you would be wanting a job."

"Wasey's job?"

"Yes."

I grinned at that. In the eyes of my mind I could still see Gus Wasey standing there beside the wreck of the Thunderbolt, trying—not too hard—to conceal the gladness he felt because I had crashed.

"I happen to remember," I said, trying to get my thoughts in order, "that you had three or four pilots in quick succession before you got Wasey. What's the matter with the job?"

"They thought that because I liked flying I would consider all pilots a combination of Tarzan and Clark Gable, and that all they had to do was to moo at me and I would fall right into their manly arms. So I fired them."

"Is that," I asked her quickly, "what Wasey is doing — mooing at you?"

"I'm not satisfied with him," she said. "I'm—I'm—" Suddenly, astonishingly, her composure broke. She was like a small girl of half her age. Her blue eyes grew cloudy with trouble. I tried to tell myself that she was putting on an act, but she was too convincing — even for Gail Wilson. "I'm afraid of him, Captain Holt, and I've never been afraid of anything or anybody before in my whole life!"

"What are you afraid of?" I demanded.

"I don't really know," she said, shakily. "But he's put in a new hangar crew and they—well, they look at me."

"I'm looking at you now."

"I guess I can't make you understand," she said, tiredly.

"One thing I don't understand," I said, "is why you tell this to me. There are probably fifty pilots in and around Los Angeles who would roll over and put their feet in the air at the chance to fly your planes."

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"I know all about you, Captain," she said. "I've known about you ever since I became interested in flying. I know your reputation. You are called one of the hardest-boiled men in the business. You can fly anything with wings. You are old enough to—to—"

"Not to moo at you?" I said, grinning. "Don't be too sure."

HER quick anger flamed at that. "I've heard," she said, coldly, "that girls go for you pretty hard. But if you're a Great Lover, let me warn you. One pass at me and you're out, if I never fly again."

"Personally," I said, eyeing her bright head, "I prefer brunettes. And now tell me, does your pilot rank with, or after, the butler? Does he eat with the upper or lower servants?"

She flushed, but her answer was direct. "You'd have nothing to do with the servants. When I want to fly to Palm Springs, or to Agua Caliente, or anywhere, I'll let you know myself. There's an apartment over my hangar you can use, or you can live in town if you'd rather."

"One more question," I said. "Slosson recommended Wasey. He's supposed to be your agent and business manager. Why didn't you have him get you a new pilot?"

"That's the reason," she said, not meeting my eyes, "because he recommended Wasey and because he doesn't want me to fire him. This morning I told Wasey he was through, but he doesn't seem to believe it."

That settled it. "Want me to fire him?"

"Yes," she said.

"I'll be on the job in an hour."

"Fine. I've got to go to the studio. If I'm not there when you get out to the ranch, go as far as you like. I'll telephone Miss Shanklin, my secretary, that you're coming."

I got out and she drove away. So Wasey wouldn't believe he was fired. Wasn't that nice? I burned up the road getting out to the Valley Airport, where Johnny was working on the ship.

He wiped his hands on a grease rag and walked over to my red convertible coupé.

"Any dope on that etched wire, kid?" I asked him.

"No."

Plainly he was discouraged. And he needed sleep, too. For two nights, now, he and I had hidden in the dark corner of the hangar, watching hopefully for someone to come along with another bright idea of causing damage to the Thunderbolt. But nothing happened except that we lost a lot of sleep. Like any other men who lived hard, played to high limits and fought without gloves, we had made our share of enemies. But none among them, I was sure, would stoop to a trick like that.

Muggs showed us the control wire. "Just a little drop of acid done the trick, boss," he said.

"When would it have been put on?" I asked.

"I couldn't be sure. I'd say just a little while before your test flight."

"Who was around the hangar then?" I demanded sharply.

"The Seventh Regiment," he said, shrugging. "Every flyer and every greaseball on the field come around to gander at the job when they heard you was going to lift her up for the first time."

"Find the man who did it," I said, furiously, "and I'm going to snap his spine across my knee."

I meant it, all right, but in view of later events, it would have been better had I not said it. I did not, as a matter

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of fact, snap the spine of the fan who did it. I shot him. But the night was to come when the district attorney, holding me for first degree murder, would hear about my threat, and use it against me. But that is all right. I am glad I shot the louse. I could dance on his grave with joy. The yellow-bellied rat!

CHAPTER IV.

FIRING A RIVAL.

I GOT Johnny off to one side, away from the eggs who wanted to feel sorry for us.

"Listen, kid," I said. "You can get to work on the repairs now. I've got a job. I can kick in eight or nine hundred a month."

He lifted his thin, mobile face and looked at me.

"What kind of a job?" he asked.

"I'm taking Wasey's job away from him."

"Flying—flying for Gail Wilson?" he asked, and his face looked suddenly tight and drawn.

"Yeah," I said. "Why not? We need the money, and in times like these, a job is a job."

"She'll break you," Johnny said.

"How would you know?" I asked him.

He took a deep breath. "Listen, big boy, take my word for it. Keep away from her. She'll end by breaking your heart."

That was funny, and I got a big laugh. But he did not laugh with me.

"Oh, I know," he said, "that you think your heart is as hard as your muscles. Love 'em and leave 'em. But—but— Oh, hell, Stu, let's sell the Thunderbolt for junk and go on down to the hot countries. Come on, let's grab the afternoon transport. With our reputation down there we can knock ourselves off something good. We—"

"No can do, son," I said. "If I don't like the job I can check out. But I want, 'specially, to have the fun of telling Wasey he's through."

Johnny's jaw line tightened and his eyes grew hard.

"It's the end of another chapter, Stu," he said. "Get mixed up with her and it'll be the end of something. We've done work for the movies, but we've never been really mixed up with that picture gang. They'll be poison to you, big boy. Call it a hunch, but I'm telling you."

"Sorry, kid," I said, "but I'm taking the job."

"Fair enough," he said with a shrug. "When you get in a jam, let me know and I'll be over."

I slapped him on the back, jerked my gear shift lever and spun out of there. Through the tiny oblong of the rear view mirror I could see him standing there, watching me until I skidded around the bend past the main building. It made me feel a little funny, his watching me like that. I began to wonder about his hunch.

RANCHO EL CIELO was as big as a country club. Gail Wilson, I guessed, was as restless as the rest of the picture people, moving from Hollywood to Beverly Hills for no good reason, then lighting like a swarm of bees upon Malibu in the summer and upon Palm Springs in the winter. And now it was fashionable to have a ranch in the Valley. But who was I to criticize their restlessness, I, who had wandered so long my roots had become too stunted to ever dig in anywhere? At least these folk had homes for a

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while before divorces, scandals or crows' feet around the eyes drove them out, which was more than I could say.

Never since leaving high school had I owned anything, except a few automobiles, which could not be loaded aboard a plane and hurried to the next city, or the next war. Oh, I had had luxury enough, but what was left now? Only a great wistfulness, sometimes, to point at a house—any kind of a house—and to say "I live there, and I'll be living there a dozen years from now." But you can't have everything. And you can't take a house down to hell with you when you make your final crash any more than you can take a big bank roll. So what? Nothing, I guess.

I drove along the adobe wall which enclosed Rancho el Cielo, looking for the entrance. The place extended for hundreds of acres between the Santa Monica Mountains and Ventura Boulevard. She might have chosen a better place for her flying activities, I thought. When the wind whooped down from the mountains flying would be difficult for anyone whose mastery of the stick was not complete.

I swung off the highway, bounced along a rutted road for a quarter of a mile and came to a stop before a huge cedar gate. In response to my honking, a panel slid open and I was briefly inspected from the other side. The gate was then swung open and I drove into a corral. On my left water spouted from a stand pipe, irrigating five or six acres of gardens. On my right was a large expanse of smooth turf which apparently served the dual purposes of polo field and landing place. A two-story building in the Monterey manner was obviously a hangar and, on the second floor, living quarters for the pilot. I drove past the service wing of Miss Wilson's huge, rambling house and pulled up before the hangar.

The doors were open. Within I could see the trim outlines of two planes. I cut my switch, vaulted out of the car and strode into the building. The mechanics—and there were four of them—were playing stud in one corner of the hangar. The almost imperceptible signs of sloppy work were all about; oil-smears on the cowlings, rust here and there on the control wires, an unpatched tear in the fabric of the sportster and driblets of grease on the floor.

SEEING me grimly inspecting the ships, one of the mechanics pulled in a stack of chips, got up and swaggered over to me.

"No one allowed in here, mister," he said in a surly voice.

I looked at him. There was something about his eyes; they touched me briefly and danced uneasily away. I did not care for him.

"Where's Wasey?" I snapped.

"Over at Valley Field. Be back in an hour. You a friend of his?"

"No. Who's the head mechanic around here?"

"I am."

I wiped my fingers along the fuselage of the amphibian. Twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of ship allowed to rot in her own grease.

"No," I corrected him. "You were, perhaps, but you aren't any more."

"Says who?" the mechanic snarled. He was big and his shoulders completely filled his overalls.

The other mechanics dropped their cards and came over.

"Says me, Stuart Holt. I'm the new boss here. I don't like dirty hangars and dirty ships. You're all through. Is that clear?"

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One of the mechanics, a bright-eyed, freckled kid, stared at me.

"Are you Captain Stu Holt?" he asked, his eyes widening. "The bird who flew through the blizzard to take food to the stranded train?"

I did not even answer him. Trouble was coming. The big mechanic was deciding to play rough. Well, that was all right. But I thought it only fair to warn him.

"Listen, mug," I said, quietly. "If you can't take it, don't start dishing it out."

But he thought he was good. He dipped his right hand into his pocket and when it came out, brass knuckles glittered in the light from the open door. So that was the way he wanted it.

He came in fast, but not quite fast enough. A tool box was, I remembered, on the floor right beside my feet. Just about the time the big fellow reached for me, I scooped up an eight-inch end-wrench and let him have it. The mechanic, under the forward momentum of his plunge at me, kept on coming. I sidestepped. He hit the cement floor with his face and slid to a stop.

The second mechanic got himself set just a moment or two too late. He was yanking a knife out of his pocket. The blade flicked open. But it did not do him any good. My end-wrench slapped him across the wrist. I could hear the bones give. He screamed. His knife skittered across the floor and I kicked it under the amphibian.

I spun around to see what the other two play-boys might have on their minds. To my astonishment I was just in time to see the young one lay a beautiful left to his companion's button. It took all the fun out of the game for the third one. He sat down suddenly and was willing that the play should end then and there. So there they were, three of them on the floor in various degrees of discomfort, the fourth on his feet and looking very pleased about everything.

THE big one pushed himself up. His face was a mess and blood was welling out of a three-inch cut on his head.

"What do you say mug?" I asked him. "Do you believe now that you're fired?"

The second—the one with the broken wrist—made a dive for his knife. I kicked him in the mouth and he decided he did not want the knife after all.

"What's your name, kid?" I asked the young one.

"Joe Benson, sir," he said, happily.

"All right, Joe, you're still on the payroll. The rest go back on relief. How do they get their pay?"

"Miss Shanklin, at the ranch house, Captain. She's Miss Wilson's secretary."

"Tell her that Mr. Holt says to pay off these lugs and to get Wasey's check ready, too. And ask her to have a car sent around to get these two to the hospital."

He took off at a lope toward the big house. The three mechanics huddled together. Two of them looked pretty sick. But I did not care. The ruckus was their idea, not mine. I believe in giving people what they want. The chief was dabbing a crimson-soaked rag at his face and head. The one with the broken wrist and the cut mouth was pulling out a couple of loosened teeth and looking at me with dazed eyes. Joe Benson came racing back from the ranch house.

"Miss Shanklin wants to see you."

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I did not want to leave the plug-uglies alone with the planes.

"All right, come on, you mugs," I said. "We'll make a picnic of it."

"Captain Holt," Joe Benson said, plucking at the sleeve of my jacket. His voice dropped to a confidential whisper. "Listen, Captain. Take things sorta easy around here till you get a chance to get the lay of the land. A lot of shenannigan's going on. Me, I'm about ready to leave, and God knows I need the jack. I'm tickled to death you blew in."

"What sort of funny things, son?" I asked him.

The boy looked scared, and his anxious eyes flitted away. "I'll tell you later, Captain," he promised. He glanced at the battered mechanics, who were moving toward the door. "Keep on the good side of this Miss Shanklin, will you, Captain? She's got more pull than a porous plaster."

"Where's Miss Wilson?"

"At the studio, I guess. I hear she'll be out just before dinner."

I nodded. I herded the mechanics together. In a dismal procession they walked through the hot California sunshine toward the side door of the big ranch house. They skirted one end of a swimming pool, its water azure blue with the reflection from the cloudless sky above.

I marched grimly behind the crew, resolved that if they started anything more I would clip them so they would stay clipped.

A butler opened the door as our bloody group approached. His eyes popped wide when he saw the crimsoned face of the chief mechanic. The color drained from his face as he inspected the others. In stunned silence he led the way through an arched hallway, at the far end of which was a vast, dim room furnished in the Spanish manner.

THE man servant turned in at a small, business-like office just before reaching the living room. A woman was seated behind a large desk of chromium, plate-glass and teak. When she looked up at the sound of shuffling feet she reached out with both hands and clutched the edges of the desk. She was about my age, perhaps thirty-one, and her hair was at least two shades too blond. There was a hard bright glitter to her jade green eyes.

"You," she said to me "are Captain Holt?"

"Mister Holt," I said.

She looked me over, speculatively, missing no details of my hard gray eyes, or my too-prominent nose, or my chin which had a crash-scar on its point. She inspected my tweed suit with care.

Then, "Miss Wilson told me you were coming out to take charge. That is, if you are really Captain—Mr. Holt. You'll understand I have to be very careful. How do I know you are he?"

"Call up Clunk Slosson," I said, distinctly. "Ask him what I look like."

She blinked at that and I could have sworn that her icy composure cracked perceptibly. Her eyes darted toward the big mechanic, and it seemed to me that some unspoken message flashed between them. What, I wondered, was going on in this great estate? One small girl, surrounded by a stinking outfit of chiselers! Small girl? Hell's hot cinders, she was not too small nor too girlish to earn an income two or three times as large as that of the President of the United States!

"I'm afraid," Miss Shanklin said, "that we aren't going to get on here

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together, Captain Holt. Even before you report for orders you injure three men in whom Miss Wilson has confidence."

"She's dumber than I thought, then, sister," I snapped. "And maybe we'd better read this into the records right away. I was not reporting for orders. I've already had them straight from Miss Wilson."

She did not care for that. I could see her knuckles whiten on the desk and, suddenly, her green eyes blazed fury at me. But her self-control was marvelous. Instantly she recovered and was smiling.

"If Rogan," she said, nodding toward the mechanic with the battered face, "apologizes, would you be willing to keep him on?"

"No," I said. "He's out. So are these other two. Joe, here, is going to stay."

She took a long breath and tried again. Why, I wondered, was she so terribly anxious to keep these mechanics around?

"Captain," she said, carefully, "do you value this new position of yours?"

"Not particularly."

"Make an enemy of me," she said, evenly, "and you won't keep it a week."

It was on my tongue to tell her to go and jump into some lake, but suddenly I found myself thinking of two things; of the money, which Johnny Clark needed, and of the expression on Gail's lovely face when she said that Wasey "looked at her." So—

"Fair enough, sister," I said, smoothly. I even managed to smile at her, and she brightened perceptibly. Her eyes, however, were still glittering. "The last thing in the world I'd want would be to make an enemy of you. But get rid of these monkeys." I smiled again and gave her the eye so sweetly that it almost turned my own stomach. "Come on, Joe," I said with apparent reluctance, "let's get back to work."

WITH that I opened the door so suddenly that the horse-faced butler, standing on the other side of the panel, was nearly knocked down. I came to a stop and looked at him.

"Is that a habit of yours?" I asked.

"What, sir?"

"Resting your ear against the keyhole? If it is, break yourself of it, or I'll beat it out so flat you can use it for a serving platter."

I swung away. Without speaking to Joe, who trotted happily at my heels, I marched directly to the hangar. Once inside, I turned on him.

"All right, kid, now tell me what's queer about this layout."

He looked about fearfully. He even looked under the planes.

"Well, Captain," he said at last, "I've only been here a couple of months, but sometimes it seems to me that everybody in this outfit is sort of working against Miss Wilson. And gee, ain't she beautiful?"

"She is. But why do you think they're working against her?"

"Oh, I don't know. But this Miss Shanklin is kind of funny. Three-four times I've driven her into Van Nuys when the chauffeur's been busy. We've gone into a drug store and all she does is go into a telephone booth and call up somebody. Why couldn't she of done it in her office?"

"I wouldn't know. What else is funny?"

"Well, this feller Slosson. He comes out all the time. He is Miss Wilson's agent, you know, and he manages her business."

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"I know," I snapped. "What about him?"

"Well, him and Wasey get into huddles up in Wasey's apartment, and whenever anybody comes around they pipe down. And honest, when I was in L.A., I saw them come out of a chop suey joint, and they had this Miss Shanklin with them. They knew I had saw them and the next day she calls me in, gives me a five dollar raise and tells me not to say anything."

"Did you?"

"No. I didn't darst to. I thought maybe they was just fooling around, like, and that I didn't have any call losing my job about a thing like that."

Not very much to go on, but despite my questioning I could not get any more facts out of him. Miss Wilson, it appeared, was at home very little. Riding at the height of her miraculous popularity, she was here, there and everywhere—but at home. The place was running itself—with Miss Shanklin's assistance. And it looked very much to me as if it were running smack into a crash.

I turned away. "Where are my living quarters, Joe?" I asked.

"Upstairs. I'll get your bags and show you."

HE got my luggage out of the roadster and led me up a flight of stairs which opened upon a gallery at the second floor level. Long latticed windows gave into a pleasant, airy apartment of living room, chamber and bath. Wasey had not yet packed his things. They were everywhere, and in great confusion. I remembered Gail Wilson's words:

"—I told Wasey he was through," she had said, "but he didn't seem to believe it."

Well, he would believe it now.

"Know where he keeps his suitcases, Joe?" I asked.

"In that closet," he said, pointing.

"Get them, and we'll do his packing for him."

We had just started packing when there was a step on the threshold.

"Drop those things of mine," snarled a voice from the doorway.

"Delighted to," I said, tossing a shaving kit into a suitcase and straightening up. "Finish it yourself, but don't take too long, Wasey."

Gus Wasey, his smooth face crimson with fury, was standing in the doorway, his hands opening and closing convulsively.

"So the great Captain Holt," he sneered, "the guy who was the newspaperman's pet, the photographer's fall guy, has come down to flying for a dame!"

"Yeah," I said. "And taking the job of a porch-climbing, yellow-streaked, two-timing racketeer who isn't above running an angle on a girl!"

The cords in his thick neck stood out and his eyes became black beneath their narrowed lids. But he still stood there, taking it while I poured it on.

"Listen, Wasey," I said. "I know you've hated me ever since I took that unlimited race away from you at Cleveland, two years ago. But I can go you one better. I've never liked you since the first day I saw you, at Roosevelt Field. You were taking your first solo then, remember, and you were scared stiff—yellow from the neck down. You offered the instructor ten dollars to wait until the wind stopped blowing, remember? Now get your truck out of here or I'll throw it off the gallery, and you with it."

If he had had a gun on him, he would have pulled it and shot me dead. I knew it from the look in his eyes. I

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can tell. Being able to tell such things is one reason I've lived until now. But he had no gun. Not daring to use his fists on me, he decided to do nothing at all—yet.

"Holt," he said, walking slowly over to his suitcases, "you been tops for a long time, you and Johnny Clark. But take my advice and scram while you can."

"I think," I said, watching him pack, "that I'm going to like it here."

The other, closing a suitcase and yanking at the strap, glanced at me with the eyes of a rattlesnake.

"Holt," he said, "your luck has run out. And you'd better run out with it. Remember that crock you call the Thunderbolt? Your test hop shows your run of luck has ended. So scram, while the scramming is good."

THAT made me mad. I took a single step forward. Before Wasey could turn, my two big hands had grabbed him by the collar and belt. I jostled him off-balance and hustled him to the gallery. Struggling, clawing at doors and windows, he skidded to the top of the stairs.

"Whenever you think of me," I told him, "remember that I'm the guy who kicked you out of your job."

"I pushed him. He tottered forward. I finished the job with my right foot. Once it had been a good foot that could punt a football sixty yards. It was still pretty good, because he did not land until he hit the third step from the bottom of the flight. He bounced to the landing. He lay still for a moment, then pushed himself to his feet.

"Jeez, Captain," young Joe blurted. "I thought you kilt him."

Wasey stood still looking up at me with eyes that were terrible in the blazing intensity of their hate. But I was not worried. He had hated me for a long time, and it was just as well to bring it out into the open, where you could weigh it and measure it and know it for what it was.

"I'll tell you something, Holt," he said, his voice shaking with suppressed fury. "You have just committed suicide."

"You've been playing around Hollywood too long, Wasey," I said. "You're being dramatic."

I laughed down at him. In the hot countries I might have taken his threat seriously. But this was California, and murder isn't one of the things you worry about.

"If you don't think I'm a pretty lively corpse," I added, my tone hardening, "just hang around for a couple of minutes more and see what happens. Joe, heave his bags down to him."

I knew he would not hang around, so I went into my room and started cleaning up. I heard his luggage thump on the ground, heard his fluent curses when one of the bags apparently burst open. Joe came into the room. He shuffled around on one foot.

"What's the matter, kid?" I asked him.

"Nothing, Captain," he said. Then, "Listen, Captain, I got to tell you something. Remember when you had that flying outfit down in Central America?"

"Yes."

"Well, I seen your pictures in the papers, then, and I sort of thought to myself that you were—were—well, the kind of a guy I'd want to be like when I got old enough to get around. And—"

"Shut up!" I snapped at him. "Listen, if I ever hear you say that again, or even think you're thinking about it, I'll bust you one, see? Never

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be a soldier of fortune, if you have to starve first, nor a stunt flyer. I'll see if I can't work you in for some flying time. Then I'm going to fire you and send you to a friend of mine for a job. You're young enough. Some day you might ride a transport. Now get the hell out of here."

He went out, and I heard him whistling at his work in the hangar.

CHAPTER V.

THE ASSASSIN.

IT was not too pleasant, standing there in the window that looked out upon the dun mountains and letting Wasey's words run through my mind.

"Your luck has run out, Holt," he had said.

Thinking that over, I wondered if it was not so. Old at thirty-two, too old to fly the big ships. Too old to get a job in a business that drank the blood of young men in thirsty gulps! Not only old, but lonely; except for Johnny, almost all my real friends were dead.

Curious, I took a match out of my pocket and held it out at arm's length. It was as steady as if my muscles had been of steel. No signs of age there. I stood up, eyed a tiny spot on the other wall and held my index finger toward it. I closed my eyes, walked toward the wall. When I again opened my eyes my finger was touching the exact center of that small spot. So my muscular reactions were still as sharp-edged as they had been in those days when life had been a gay adventure, with all the world to play in. Well, that was something.

I heard the purring of a motor down in the corral. With an eagerness that astonished me, I stepped to the gallery and looked down. It was Gail, swerving in from the gate, her bright yellow hair attracting all the sunlight there was.

She looked up quickly, saw me standing there. Her vivid young lips broke into a gay smile and she waved.

It was then, God help me, that I knew the last and worst thing of all had happened to me. I guess I had known it since the morning at court, but I had not permitted myself to bring the thought out for consideration. I was in love with her!

Wasn't that a gag? Me, hard-boiled, far-wandering mug whose only assets were good health and a knowing hand on the stick, in love with a girl who had the world by the tail! Suddenly I began to realize why Johnny had not wanted me to take this job. But how would he have known that? I had never been a push-over for any pretty doll who gave me the eye, and nobody knew that better than Johnny. What, then, had been in his mind?

There was one cure for my trouble. I had only to jump in my car, hurry out to Johnny's apartment in Glendale and say, "Let's go places." Within an hour he and I would be on the trail to something and somewhere. In the riotous hurly-burly of adventure I could numb my mind into thinking everything was all right. Others had done it; why couldn't I?

And then I knew. Gail was in a jam. Or, if she was not now, she would be soon. I could smell trouble as an animal smells the approach of death. And no matter who she was, I could not leave her to face it alone. It might be a private fight, but somehow I had elbowed in—and I was in to stay. So that, definitely, was that.

Presently she sent for me. The telephone rang and her imperious young

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voice asked me over to the house. She was sitting in the big living room.

"What," I asked, "is the etiquette among private pilots? Do they stand up or are they asked to sit down?"

"Sit down," she said, unsmiling. "I hear you have been starting ructions."

IT was hard not to look at her. Harder still when I did. No girl had any right to be as beautiful as she. Yet there was character beneath the beauty. Her small, pointed chin had a decided cut to it and her eyes struck you with the level force of a physical blow.

"Yeah," I said. "Now I'm on your payroll, I may as well tell you. If I were you I'd throw out everybody from this Shanklin wench and the fish-faced butler down, and while I had my hand in I'd give your sweet-smelling agent the bum's rush, too. They've got a racket on."

"What kind of a racket?" she asked, and if my words had made an impression, I had no means of knowing. She was, as I have said, an actress.

"I wouldn't know," I confessed. "But there's something. I've cleaned out the hangar gang. The one I kept would stand on his head for a week if I asked him to."

She stirred faintly in her chair. A tiny crease of thoughtfulness came between her high arched brows. I wanted to leap from my seat, stamp across the ten feet of carpet and grab her in my arms. But I was on her payroll—her flying chauffeur. The others, my predecessors, had all made passes at her. I was not going to have her tell me I was like all the rest.

She lifted her bright young head and said, "I can't do it, Captain Holt, I just can't."

"Let me do it for you," I said. "I know a dozen good agents downtown. Better agents than Clunk Slosson. And the town is full of secretaries and butlers. I could sweep the place clean in twenty minutes."

She smiled oddly. "Clunk wants me to sweep you out."

"I could have told you that when you hired me," I snapped.

Definitely she changed the subject. "Can you take six of us to Agua Caliente tonight?"

"Sure," I said. "I haven't tested the amphibian, but if she's all right we can leave in half an hour."

"Seven o'clock will do."

I got out of there. It was lucky the amphibian was in good shape. Such was my disposition that I threw her around the skies in a way that no decent amphibian should be called upon to stand. When I slapped her back on the ground, young Joe Benson was standing there bug-eyed.

"Man, man," he breathed, "if I could only fly like that!"

"Pipe down!" I snapped at him. "Get the plugs clean and change the oil."

I telephoned Johnny and told him where I was going. His disapproving silence was eloquent.

"When I come back, Johnny," I said, "maybe we'll shove off for China. Might be something there for us with the Japs raising all that hell."

For an instant there was a lilt to his voice. "I'll say there would be, big boy!" he yelled over the line. Then, his tone slurring downward, "No. You're hooked. I told you."

"Yes," I said, "you told me. Well, I'll be seeing you next week."

"Sure," he said, and hung up.

I had intended to tell him to keep an eye on Clunk Slosson and Gus Wasey

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while I was gone. But I was so low in my mind that I forgot.

SOMETHING happened at Agua Caliente that nearly made me put my chips back in the rack. A peon stepped out of the shrubbery and came within an inch or so of blowing the top of my head off.

It was on the second evening we were there. All the first and second days I had been avoiding Gail and her crowd. I had stayed in my room most of the time so I would not have to keep looking at her. But by the time the second evening was well along I was getting the wah-wahs sitting in my room and drinking highballs alone.

I went down to the casino to have a whirl at roulette, but Gail, her sunny hair shimmering in the indirect lighting, was at the center table. She was having luck and the croupier's rake was shoving chips toward her every time the ball came to rest. She was as excited as a child. Watching her, I wondered how long it would be before life would hold no more excitement and all the edges of her enjoyment would have become dulled. Not long, in the picture business.

I went out into the patio. A Mexican band was playing for the dancers. Listening to the music, I thought about the times that Johnny and I had gone helling in the hot countries. Odd, the way music stirs old memories. Dim, far-off pictures came to me on the wings of the music, pictures of men I had thought were forgotten.

Gail came out, a white, unsubstantial figure in the warm and scented darkness.

"What's the matter with you, Stuart?" she asked me. "Why are you so stand-offish?"

I shrugged. "I just don't fit into the picture crowd," I said. "I never did."

"What kind of a crowd do you fit into?"

"A crowd where you can say what you mean and, if necessary, express your feelings in actions, not acting."

"Yes, I've heard that about you," she said, slowly.

"Your kind of life confuses me," I told you. "I don't understand it. I don't understand, for instance, why you let a louse like Slosson hang around you and handle your affairs. I don't understand why you let a girl like that Brenda Ellsworth—" I nodded back toward the gambling room, "—breathe the same air with you, much less bring her along on parties."

She did not answer. She just stood there, looking up at me, so unbelievably lovely in the tropic moonlight that I could have hated her for it.

"No," she said, breaking that long moment of electric silence, "I don't suppose you would understand. You are strong, and violent, and masculine. You don't like any problem you can't settle with your fists and—"

Her wide violet eyes suddenly flickered. They swerved away from my face and focussed upon something behind my back. A look of horror came into them. I knew that look. I had seen it in other eyes before.

MY right arm went out and swept her aside. My muscles moved before my brain told me what the trouble was. I ducked and spun on my left heel. As I went around the gun exploded behind me and I could feel the sharp whip of a bullet missing my head by scant fractions of an inch.

I saw the gun, then, and the arm that held it pointed, after the Latin fashion, at my head. I saw the dark blur of the

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body behind it. I dived under the gun, slamming it upward with my shoulder just as it flamed a second time. My arms went around an unprepared figure, hugged it tight and we went down, the two of us, with a great crashing of the leafy hedge.

Dimly, behind me, I heard Gail scream. But it made no impression on me. The struggling body beneath me was that of a Mexican, a peon. His knees were drumming up against my stomach. My left hand got his throat, cut off his wind. The drumming stopped.

"Tell me, dog," I snarled in Spanish. "Who paid you to shoot me?"

I let him have a little air.

"Mande, patron!" he gasped. "It was mistake. I think you are somebody else!"

I could hear footsteps pounding across the patio.

I knew I had but little time to learn what I must know.

"Stuart!" Gail's voice cried, from above me. "You'll kill him!"

"Go away!" I snapped up at her. I closed down on his throat with my left hand, got the thumb of my right hand against his eyeball. Then. "Tell me," I growled, "or I will squeeze your eyeball out like a ripe grape!"

I pressed a little to show him. He screamed.

"Was it a gringo?" I demanded.

"Mother of God, no!" he shrieked as I put a little more pressure on the corner of his eyeball. "It was a Mexican, *patron,* from Tijuana. He said his name was Pablo. He gave me ten dollars, American, and pointed at you."

He was telling the truth. I knew it. Uniformed men were snatching at my coat, clawing at me, so I got up and let them have him. The movie crowd had come out of the gambling room and were standing in a tight circle about me, chattering like magpies. Gail was not chattering. She was just looking at me.

Except for the bright spots of unnecessary make-up on her cheek, her skin was drained of color.

"Would—would you really have pushed his eye out?" she asked me.

"No," I snapped. "I was just playing pat-a-cake!"

I left her. I went directly to my room and got Johnny on the long-distance.

He sounded tight at first, but sobered instantly when I told him what had happened.

"Check at the airport," I said, "and find out if Gus Wasey has been flying today—or yesterday. If he has, check along the border on your side of the Line. I'll be waiting to hear from you."

"Action," he said, drily, "is good for you. You sound all pepped up. Come home to papa and all will be forgiven."

"It's a relief," I said, "to bump into something you can settle with your own bare hands."

He called back an hour later to tell me that Wasey had been away most of the day. The traffic manager of the San Diego field had told him Wasey's plane had been there for three hours but had not crossed into Old Mexico. And I, in the meantime, had discovered that Tijuana had not checked him in.

"Thanks, Johnny," I said. "He probably came over the border by car. But it would be tough to prove."

"Don't try," he said. "When I see him I'll give him a good old-fashioned going over."

"No you won't," I said, sharply. "He's my meat. Do you hear? He's my meat."

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"You always were a selfish lug," he said, and hung up on me.

CHAPTER VI.

A PROPOSITION.

IT was on the fourth night after we got back to the ranch that the trouble came. I couldn't go on the way things were. It did not matter what Gail called it, but what Gus Wasey said was true; I had fallen off the top of the heap. I was a flyer for a dame. My luck had run out. And the worst of it was I did not want to quit. It was enough just to be around her and to know I would see her three or four times a day.

It's a funny thing; when a hard-boiled egg like me falls in love, he falls in all over and it somehow softens him up. Take some of these Sweet Susies in the pictures. I had known a dozen of them who would need a double to cross the street for them. But how they could slap the dolls around in the pictures!

So there it was. A dozen times a day I was on the point of telling her to find another pilot. And then I would remember the rackets they were trying to run on her, and how young and sweet and lovely she was, and I would end exactly where I started, nowhere at all.

Half an hour after we landed at Rancho el Cielo, Johnny rolled up to the hangar in his car.

"Hi, kid," he said calmly.

"How'd you know I was back?"

He grinned slyly, and young Joe Benson looked uncomfortable, so I knew he had somehow arranged for Joe to let him know.

"I came to make a call with you," he said.

"Good boy," I said.

So we went looking for Wasey. No need for explanations between Johnny and me. He knew what I would be doing the instant I got back to town, so quite calmly he had declared himself in.

At Wasey's apartment the Japanese elevator boy told us he had left town that morning. He was not going to take us up.

"I'll hold him," Johnny said, quietly, "and you carve his heart out."

The Japanese boy smiled and hissed through his teeth. Then he looked at us and his expression changed. He took us up. Wasey was out, all right. The morning paper was still at his door. We went to the Brown Derby and to Levy's, but nobody had seen him. But we did run into Lou Hennig, Gail's director. We told him to ditch his blond for a few minutes.

"LISTEN, Lou," I said, over an Old-fashion, "tell me what you know about Clunk Slosson."

"He's poison ivy, Stu," he said.

"Why do you let him into your studio?"

"Because he has Gail on his list, that's why. She's the only star he has, but she's plenty. The rest of the so-called list are hams and bad actors in both senses." He took a sip of his cocktail. "You're flying for Gail, aren't you?"

"Yeah. I'm flying for her. Why?"

"Nothing, except that I'm glad of it."

"Why—again?"

His eyes met mine squarely. "I wouldn't tell this to many people, Stu, but I know that you and Johnny are on the level. This Slosson is bad, all the way through."

"You're telling me," I murmured.

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"He keeps just within the law—as far as I know. But I have a hunch that he has something on Gail. We've tried to get her to can him, but she won't."

"Something on Gail?" I echoed.

In Hollywood, that means a lot, and practically all of it bad. I took a long breath.

"I think," I said, slowly, "that Clunk is going to confide in me."

"Let's go," Johnny said, cheerfully.

The director put his hand on my sleeve. "Stu," he said, urgently, "I've known you for quite a while. You're as square a man as there is in Hollywood. Don't get mixed up in this."

"Don't be silly," I said. "Somebody's got to do it. I don't see you folks doing anything."

His shoulders slumped. "Gail told us," he said, "that if she even suspected we were interfering in her personal affairs, she'd break her contract with us."

"It's that serious, is it?" I said, feeling lower and lower about the whole thing.

"Do we have to sit here all night?" Johnny asked.

"I'll be seeing you, Lou," I said, and left him.

At the curb, Johnny looked almost happy. "Where," he asked, "would Clunk be?"

We went to his office. It was locked. I gave his door a couple of gentle little pushes, and somehow the glass panel broke. But it was of wire-woven fire glass and it would not break enough so we could get our arms in and turn the knob from the inside. So we drove to Clunk's house, just beyond the outpost in the Santa Monica mountains. That was closed, too. We discussed breaking in, but decided against it. What we had for Clunk could wait without spoiling until he returned. Like good old cheese, it would get riper and riper, waiting for him.

SO now it was the fourth night since we had returned from Agua Caliente and I had not yet had my interview with Wasey or Clunk Slosson. Gail had just finished a picture and was having a few days of rest while they were casting the next. That made everything much worse for me. She was around the house most of the time, and so was a gang of satellites—the usual gang who can be counted upon to tag after any successful star while she is successful and to drop her like a hot potato the instant she starts to slip. But I kept out of their way as much as I could so I would not have to see Gail too often. Every time I looked at her, it did something to me.

On this fourth night she had planned a big party. Caterers came from Hollywood with enough food to feed an army. They strung electric lights up over the tennis courts and swimming pool and made ready for a large evening.

I was having a highball in my apartment over the hangar about four o'clock when Miss Shanklin, Gail's too-blond secretary, came up. My back was toward the door and when I heard her knock, I called, "Come in."

She did. She had had a new permanent and another henna rinse, or something, and her jade green eyes were very coy.

"A lot of people from the studios are coming over tonight, Captain Holt," she said. "Some of them worked with you when you were making 'Wings of Death' and they want particularly to see you again. Miss Wilson wants to know if you won't come to the party." She looked at my

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glass and raised her penciled eyebrows. "And I," she added, "could use a highball."

I fixed her one. I could see she had something on her mind beside that invitation.

"Do you happen to know," I asked, lazily, "if Clunk Slosson and Gus Wasey are coming back to town soon?"

She looked at me thoughtfully. "Yes," she said. "They'll be coming to the party. Late, I think."

"The party," I said, softly, "is bound to be a success!"

"Do you like your job?" she asked, unexpectedly.

"So-so," I said. "Why?"

"How would you like a different one—one with more pay?"

"What one?"

"I know of one. Eighteen thousand a year."

"Where?" I asked.

"In Rio de Janeiro. Starting a new air line."

I carefully arranged my face into a smile of interest.

"Where would I get the details?" I asked her.

She studied my face for a moment. Her jade green eyes were speculative. "You don't go for girls very hard, do you, Stuart?"

"They aren't my besetting sin," I said. "On the other hand, I'm not exactly an anchorite."

"It's too bad," she sighed. "I have an idea that you and I could get along wonderfully if you'd just break down and be human."

It was hard to hold the smile. But I guess I managed it. She still looked coy.

"Listen, baby," I said, smoothly, "how can I be interested in the nicer things of life when I have to earn a lot of money fairly quickly?"

She brightened at that. "This job," she said, "would pay you the first six months' salary in advance. That is, upon arrival in Rio."

"Nice," I marveled. "And who do I see?"

"See me," she said. "The offer is open for one week only. And I'll have your tickets and a grand for expense money within six hours of the time you say oke."

I TOOK a long breath. "Would you, by chance," I purred, "be taking the same boat?"

There was sudden flame in the jade green of her eyes. She was scarlet-mouthed and sleek and ugly. Why, in God's name, did Gail have to put up with her?

"I might," she said, with odd intensity, "be persuaded to take the same boat."

It was my turn to say, or do, something. What I wanted to do was to slap hell out of her. But I knew that was not the move now. She knew something that it was very important for me to know—for Gail's sake.

"Listen, sister," I said, confidentially, "tell me the racket. I know you want to get me out of here, but so long as you'll come along, too—well, that makes it different, doesn't it?"

For a long, long moment I thought she was about to tell me. But give them a chance and a woman will outscheme a man every time. She stood up.

"I can't tell you—yet," she said, and waited as if the last word had not been spoken.

The pause was embarrassing. I dropped my glass, wasting a half a tumblerful of good liquor. By the time I had finished picking up the pieces, the tension had broken.

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"Do I have to go to the party?" I asked her, merely to say something.

"If you don't, Miss Wilson will be disappointed."

And she was disappointed about something, too. I could see it on her enamelled face. I was, I guess, just a little tight. It amused me to imagine what she would look like if I told her what I really thought of her.

"I'll be there," I promised her.

She went out, and I knew myself for a fool. I should have kissed her. I could have done it, just as I could have taken a big dose of bitter quinine. And she would probably have told me something that would have been of value. God knows I had plenty of faults, but I had never been one to go necking around indiscriminately. It was not a question of morals; I was just a trifle too fastidious. And I had let a chance pass by. Perhaps, if I had clinched with her then and there, a couple of punk mechanics, now dead, would still be living. Perhaps even Joe Benson—but it is too late to think about that now.

I got another highball and drank it down quickly. So they wanted to get rid of me, did they? They wanted to get rid of me badly enough so they would pay me the price of a steamship ticket and a thousand dollars in advance to get me out of the way. I had no illusions about the rest of the money. That would not be paid, of course. The idea was to get me away so they could do—what?

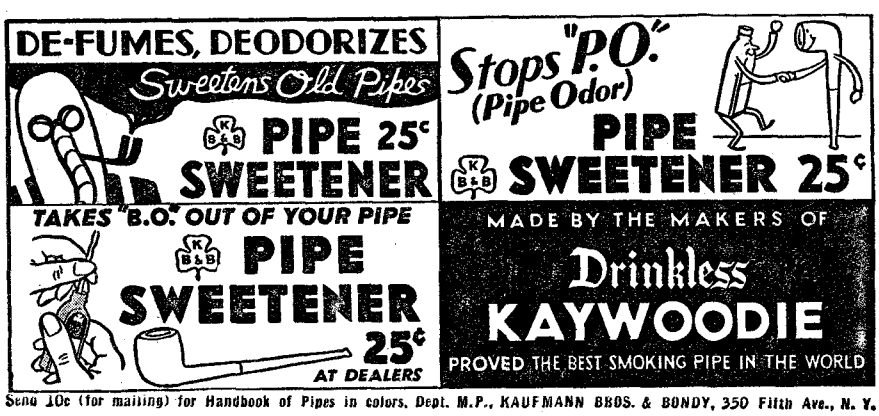
Sitting there, fixing myself one drink after another, I tried to imagine the various rackets they might be trying to pull. I thought of all sorts of things, some of them pretty bad. But the fact of the matter is that at no time, even after I got pretty drunk, did I imagine anything half so horrible as what they actually had in mind.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

Bitten Bullets

IN Revolutionary days it was usual for a man being horsewhipped to be handed a bullet to chew on. Some of these tooth-marked hunks of lead are shown at the Fort Ticonderoga museum.

—*J. W. Holden.*



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The Red Scorpion

By ANTHONY M. RUD

Author of "Grit in His Gizzard," "The Monster of the Mud-line," etc.

Full pardon for any convict discovering a way to the interior of Australia! — And here was Blaxland willing to battle hell itself for freedom

Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

RIVERS FLOW UPHILL.

"JOHN MACARTHUR has lost eighty-one fine wool sheep from starvation this blasted month. There is not enough flesh on all the sheep still living to give all of our thirty thousand souls one mouthful apiece. In other supplies, there cannot be more than two weeks' supply, even if we let the convicts starve!"

General Lachlan Macquarie, Governor of New South Wales, following the hapless Captain Bligh of the Bounty, closed his browned right fist.

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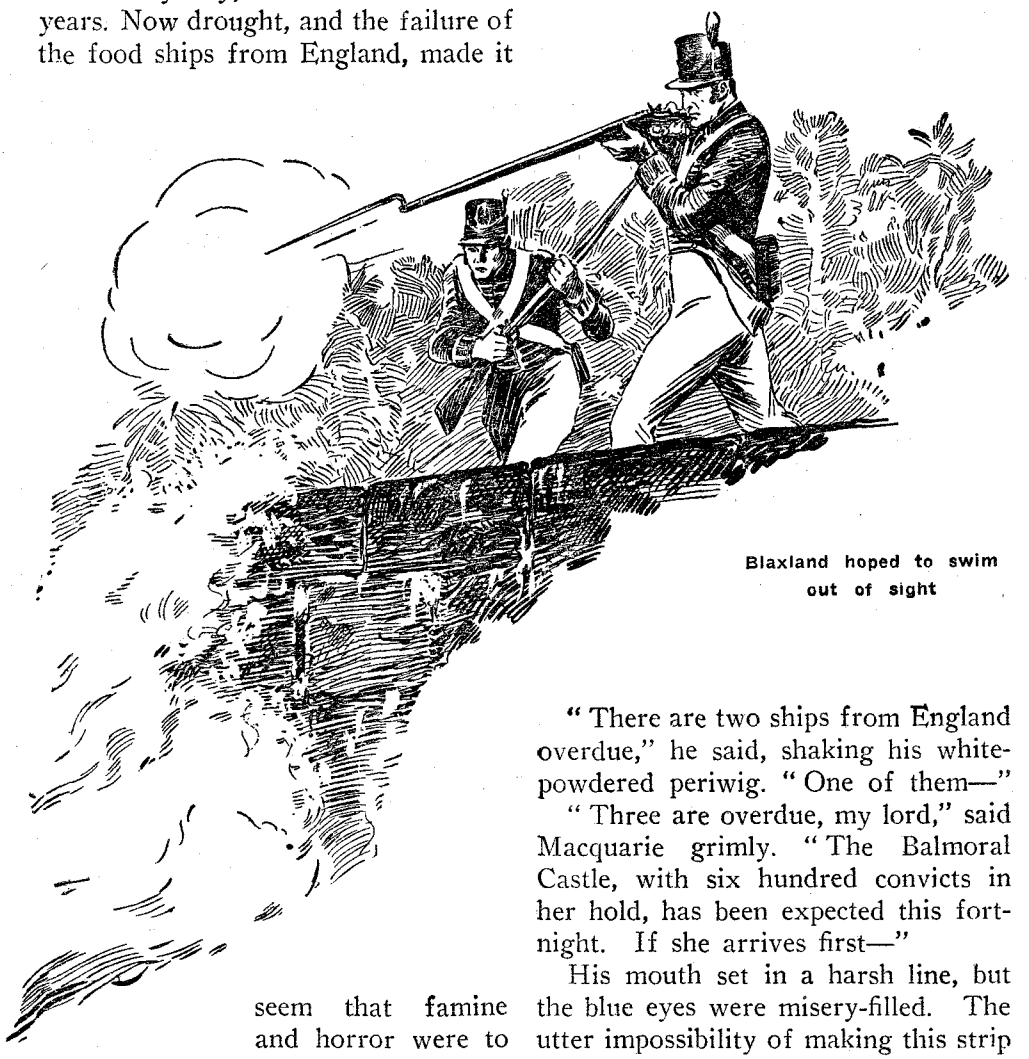
He rarely raised his voice, though he was a man of strength. The work of undoing Bligh's mischief, and building a colony back of Fort Jackson and Botany Bay, had taken three harsh years. Now drought, and the failure of the food ships from England, made it seem that famine and horror were to be his only reward.



Blaxland hoped to swim out of sight

Lord Bathurst of England shifted uncomfortably and frowned. He had been a visitor at Sydney four months longer now than he had expected to stay. The great sheep station he had intended to establish with John MacArthur was impossible—unless some way could be found through the impassable barrier of the Blue Mountains to the interior. So far, all attempts to cross the mountains had failed.

"There are two ships from England overdue," he said, shaking his white-powdered periwig. "One of them—"

"Three are overdue, my lord," said Macquarie grimly. "The Balmoral Castle, with six hundred convicts in her hold, has been expected this fortnight. If she arrives first—"

His mouth set in a harsh line, but the blue eyes were misery-filled. The utter impossibility of making this strip of infertile land, fifty miles at greatest width, by two hundred miles in length, sustain a convict colony of twenty-eight thousand exiles, had been proved to him. And England each year started food ships laden with the absolute minimum in rations for all.

Then one out of four such ships failed to reach Australia...

Loren Raley, Charles Butterworth

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and two others of the council spoke indignantly concerning England's responsibilities.

But all such talk was futile. Lord Bathurst rose to his feet.

"Gentlemen," he said impressively, "I believe in the great sea which lies in the interior of this continent. It must be similar to our Mediterranean. The fact that the Nepean River and those other small r i v e r s cutting through bottomless gorges in the mountains seem to flow uphill strikes me as bosh."

"Ah, but that is proved!" sputtered Butterworth, his pince-nez falling from his broad, fat nose. "The great engineer, Fitzgerald—"

"Was mistaken. That is all!" Bathurst finished bitingly. "Water seeks its own level always." He glared at them all, from the full height of his five feet four inches.

"But they all flow *away* from the ocean!" Butterworth defended feebly.

Bathurst, full of a new idea, did not answer this, which of course was demonstrable truth.

"I believe, gentlemen, that a way over or through the mountains can be found! Yes, in spite of those fifteen-hundred-foot gorges and blank walls of rock, and in spite of the rapids and falls of the rivers!"

"So many have tried," sighed Loren Raley, a white-haired, pink-faced old man who had hoped to be Bligh's successor as governor—and who had vegetated at Sydney when his hopes exploded in his face.

"Let more try!" snapped the diminutive lord. "I am giving up my plans, and going back to England—when I can. But I shall endeavor to leave my name as a true friend to Australia, not just as one who came, saw and was conquered. I shall—"

Here ensued a strange interruption. From the smoke-cured rafters overhead something heavy, segmented and armored fell to the eucalyptus boards of the governor's table with a rattling crash.

ALL the men arose swiftly, backing away. It was a huge red scorpion with forward-curved tail, and claws as big as those of a crayfish, opening and closing in anger. It was the only deadly creature in the whole of Australia, save only the crocodiles of the yet unknown Cape York.

Raley fumbled out the big pistol he wore; but Macquarie motioned him to put it away. Taking up a long-bladed paper-knife, the governor leaned forward. The thin blade whizzed sidewise through the air. There was a *click*—and the scorpion still was there, waving its tail as though nothing had happened. But the end segment, containing the deadly sting, had been separated from its body!

Saying nothing, Macquarie picked up the now harmless creature as one might pinch the back of a crayfish, and tossed it out of the low window to grass in the yard.

"Its claws will suffice so it will not starve," he said laconically. "Better off than we. Ah, yes, my lord, you were saying?"

Bathurst shook his powdered head. "I am glad this is not a superstitious age," he said dryly. "Our forefathers would have thought that an omen of disaster and death. We moderns have learned that o m e n s and witchcraft, all of the black arts, exist only when someone believes in them."

This was entirely too modern for some of the council, who exchanged alarmed and doubtful looks; but no one spoke.

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"So the crux of my proposal is simply this: I shall leave with the governor a sum of five thousand English pounds. This is to be given unconditionally to the man or men who succeed in discovering a way across or through the Blue Mountains, to the interior of Australia!"

The sharp intake of breath from all of the council could be felt in the ensuing seconds of silence. Money being worth what it was at the time, 1813, this was generosity comparable to the offer of a hundred-thousand-pound prize today. Many of the councilmen began to frown and ponder ways by which they themselves might win this great wealth.

But Lachlan Macquarie was on his feet, something like a vision reflected in his blue eyes. He thanked Bathurst for all of Australia, and then added briefly an inspiration which had just come to him.

"I shall add to my lord Bathurst's munificent offer," he said, "any five square miles of Australia lying beyond the mountains, to belong to the prize-winner and his heirs forever. Also," and here and there councilmen noted his dour look, "I shall ask each month, from now on, for a volunteer explorer *from among our convicts!* Each will be outfitted and loosed in the foothills of the mountains. If any wins through, and returns to show the way, he will receive full pardon as an English subject, in addition to the two grand prizes mentioned!"

There were open murmurs of protest at this; for already Lachlan Macquarie had made a name for mercy toward convict exiles. And the ordinary settlers did not approve. The governor, receiving a man from a prison ship, sentenced to two years in chains and banishment forever, struck off one year of the sentence when the prison ship took six months or more to reach Australia.

He argued hard-headedly that six months in the hold of a prison ship meant enough punishment for any crime, even murder or treason. And so the factions which had benefited from the high-handed measures of Bligh and his autocratic predecessors constantly were complaining to the king of Macquarie's methods.

"Gentlemen," broke in the governor sharply, "do you realize we are starving? Do you know that there are scores of intrepid men sent here for political reasons who would charge the jaws of hell itself for a chance at liberty? Let us say no more. I shall hope one of you, or another of our settlers, may win. But win we shall and must! The mountains strangle—"

The door swung slowly open, and there stood a retired petty officer of the British Navy, a brass spyglass under his arm. His bronzed face had grayed in curious fashion.

"Yes, Littleton?" asked Macquarie with impatience.

"A ship!" croaked the oldster. "A ship!"

Excitement brought them all to their feet instantly. A ship meant food for all, or—

"And by her black tops'ls, sir-r, it would be the Balmoral Castle, bearing us six hundred more of them convicts, sir-r!"

CHAPTER II.

THREE YEARS AND LIFE.

OF the six hundred and eighty-three convicts sent from Yarmouth on the Balmoral Castle, four hundred and eighty-nine arrived

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at Botany Bay. Nearly two hundred died and were tossed overboard during the prison ship's stormy seven months of passage.

The living remainder were scarecrows, caricatures, maniacs, sullen imbeciles—almost anything but the rebellious, crafty, or anti-social creatures they had been in England. Unshaved, unshorn, most of them wearing the filthy rags which had been their only clothes for more than half a year, all of them with sores from their shackles, many with horrible chronic diseases that the worst of them had brought along, this belching forth of human prisoners was a sorrier spectacle than if they had come at Gabriel's trumpet from the relatively clean privacy of their own graves.

Many, of course, had deserved terrible punishment. Almost as many, though, were victims of the political and social upheaval in England, due to Napoleon's victories on the Continent, and England's truculent hesitations. In those uneasy days it was high treason to fight with him over even a strictly private matter.

The slow, staggering crawl of these half-dead men, still chained together as they came to the shore to which they had looked forward as a blessed end of the worst of their trials, was the more pitiable now—for the shore guards who took them in charge took no pains to conceal the fact that all the newcomers were bitterly unwelcome.

Buffets and curses were given for nothing, until Lachlan Macquarie observed one such incident. Mouth set in sternness, he stepped forward, halting the line. He gave brief orders; and the offending guard, to his horrified astonishment, found himself in the shackles and place of the man he had struck!

This lasted only until they reached the prison, half a mile distant. But there were no more uncalled-for brutalities in public.

The dandified but genuine Bathurst had come out with Macquarie to view the new prisoners. The nobleman was stricken dumb by the awful plight of these wretches, a few of whom he recognized because of the sensations their arrests had caused before he left England.

There was Wharton, the branch bank manager from Sussex—the fellow who had calmly admitted his defalcations, claiming that he had spent the money as he went along, and that nothing was left. Of course he had not been believed, since the missing funds reached the staggering sum of a quarter million pounds. The bank had offered him terms on his charges, if he would disgorge. Bathurst wondered if he had done so in the end.

There was the saturnine Dr. Lethridge, known to be a murderer. He had been held, his trial postponed, because the police were still searching for the *corpus delicti* of a young woman. Evidently they had not found it, after all, or the medico would have gone to the gallows at Dartmoor.

There was the English Nihilist, Simcoe, who had wangled his way into the House of Commons, only to—

That second the thoughts of Lord Bathurst whirled. He almost staggered back, lifting one lace-cuffed arm as if to ward off a blow. His slightly protuberant eyes bulged farther. He gasped, and for a second no words at all would come. Then—

"*Blaxland! You!*" he screamed in horror and dismay.

The whole line halted, even the guards staring, forgetting their tasks. There in front of the English peer a tall, tattered and filthy specimen slow-

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ly straightened from a stoop of apathy. It was shocking to see that this was a youth no more than twenty-two or twenty-three years of age at most, though his sunken, bloodshot eyes came from their glaze of numbness to a wild gleam like that of a caged tiger.

His eyes were almost all of his face that could be seen. His hair was flaming copper in spite of the dirt. It was long enough to reach his shoulders. His face to the cheek bones bristled with a rather coarse six-inch beard of the same color. Out of this tangle came the one feature Bathurst instantly had recognized—the hawklike, imperious Blaxland nose.

Though not of royalty, and not of great wealth any longer, the Blaxlands traced their ancestry back to Pepin the Short—and were prouder, perhaps, than Bathurst himself.

GEORGE CECIL BLAXLAND said nothing. His blue eyes flamed; for he knew well that Bathurst had come to the Antipodes chiefly to avoid seeing a Blaxland marry the winsome miss they both had courted. Now the peer would have a clear field, no doubt.

Incoherent, driven by emotions no doubt as mixed as the snuff he blended according to the secret formula bequeathed by Charles Fox, Bathurst ran forward and seized the arm of the unfortunate youth, demanding the reason for the chains and the banishment. At the time Bathurst himself had left England this young lieutenant of the London Guards seemed to have a happy future assured. The sweetest belle of the London season had plighted her troth to him.

The guards, awakened to their duties, would have interfered; but Lachlan Macquarie himself signaled quiet. In view of what Bathurst was doing for Australia in her need, they could not grudge him a few moments' breach of iron discipline.

The convict shook off Bathurst's arm. Inside that copper-red head pride and bitterness surged up in an engulfing hate of man and circumstance.

"Unclean! Unclean!" he gritted savagely, mocking the cry of a leper at Jerusalem's gate. "A private insult. A duello on the Mall at dawn. And I am condemned to three more years of chains and a lifetime of exile!"

"Wh-what—who was it?" stammered Bathurst, appalled.

"My superior officer, Captain Vivian Laidlaw."

Now Bathurst really understood. Laidlaw had been the hero—or villain—of many a court scandal. He had killed three men in pistol duels; and each time London sighed and marveled that one who needed killing so badly should have such skill with weapons. Now he had met one more skilled or more lucky; and probably one high-born lady wept her heart out for the scoundrel, and demanded vengeance on the survivor.

"I—I surely can do something about it—for you—" stuttered the peer. "You do not deserve this. I—"

Blaxland leaned toward him. The grim slash of a mouth scarcely parted, as he spoke so the others could not hear.

"I ask nothing for myself!" he said. "Be good to Elspeth and teach her to forget. Good-by!"

As if he had commanded the file of convicts, all started the weary forward shuffle then, and Bathurst was left to his snuff and his generous impulses—and his thoughts of Elspeth Stuart.

Macquarie came then, questioning.

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Bathurst told him of Blaxland, imploring kindly treatment for the young man until such time as he, Bathurst, could set in motion an application for full pardon.

As for himself, an immense impatience had seized the English lord. He would not wait for a cleaner ship. He would return to England immediately upon the Balmoral Castle.

CHAPTER III.

STING OF THE SCORPION.

THAT meeting with Bathurst, who had been a friend of his father and then his own rival, was a rebirth for Blaxland. The nightmare of the prison transport was finished. The stiff jolt of finding right here in Australia, able to gloat on his misery, the forty-year-old London fop whom he had vanquished for the favors of Elspeth Stuart, straightened him up from apathy and the numbness of despair. It was like an unexpected and agonizing plunge into ice water.

The effect upon red-headed George Blaxland was savage indeed. He had been resolved upon ending his misery at the first chance; and had nothing but curses for the fate that let the men chained on both sides of him in the Balmoral Castle's hold both succumb to the spotted fever which passed him as immune.

Now he tensed his tall, magnificent body, and swore grating, inward oaths that he would fool them all. He would serve his time until a chance came for escape. Then he would take it, no matter what the risk. To spend three years in chains was out of the question.

Almost the first word he heard in the prison was the announcement of the Bathurst and Macquarie prizes for the discovery of a way through the Blue Mountains. Once each month a convict who was willing to chance hardship or death was to be offered an opportunity to explore. If he failed he would have to return to complete his sentence; but great prizes were to be the rewards of success.

Under Macquarie, the bare barracks of prison buildings had been cleansed regularly. That much of mediæval horror had been lifted. But the cells, each housing two convicts, were large enough just to admit two stacked bunks of boards and straw, and leave a space eight feet by three at the side for all the rest of life for two men.

Even at night each convict wore a leg shackle, to which was attached a fifteen pound round shot and a short length of chain. This was a hideous torture to the one who had to accept the top bunk, since the bunks themselves were narrow and barely six feet long. A sleeping convict in the top bunk could not afford a nightmare, or he was likely to find himself yanked out to the floor suddenly by the fall of the heavy round shot!

Blaxland had only a few minutes in which to make the acquaintance of his cellmate, a pig-eyed, pale creature named Moebus, serving the last of a deportation year in chains for repeated offenses of a statutory nature.

One glance at the depraved, bestial face had made Blaxland shudder and turn away in dismay. To be shut in with this witless animal! It curdled the blood in his throat.

Immediately, however, he was taken out of the cell. His mane of hair was chewed short by the dull scissors of a prison barber. Then his beard was cut, and clippers brought him to a strange pallor both of cheeks and scalp.

Next he was sent, with four more

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new prisoners, to the pool. This was a sea water tank where once a month the convicts bathed. Here he dove and swam, lathered himself from head to toe with the green soft soap provided in a round tub.

On the ocean side, the breakers, driven by the January trade winds out of Samoa, were splashing spray thirty feet above the sea wall. White horses rode the crests of rollers as far out on the ocean as eye could reach.

Blaxland saw. The horror of a return to the narrow cell, with that insensate, bestial creature as an only companion, was unendurable. Now with the cleansing and the cold plunge, something akin to the old vitality was coursing his veins. His head came up in a defiance to fate.

"Better to die clean, and trying!" he said to himself.

He walked about, as if selecting a place in the pool for his final dive. A guard with flintlock musket and fixed bayonet accompanied him closely, only too willing to kill one or more of these prisoners who had come to take the bread from his own mouth.

SUDDENLY Blaxland whirled. There was almost a smile on his wide mouth as he caught one arm of the guard before the latter could bring down his weapon from shoulder.

A jerk with all his strength—and yelling his anger and alarm, the uniformed soldier took an involuntary header into the bathing pool, musket and all!

Over on the other side a sceond guard swung his musket and fired pointblank. Too hasty. The ball whistled past Blaxland's ear. He poised, waved a hand, and dove squarely into the slate colored side of a roller about to break against the sea wall!

The attempt was not wholly unreasoned. Visibility was poor. Blaxland hoped to swim out far enough so that he would be lost to sight of those on shore. Then he would attempt to parallel the shore, certain that the prison guards would hesitate long before launching a small boat in this sea. If he could stick to it long and far enough, he would slip ashore and hide somewhere until night. Then he would try to steal clothes and some sort of outfit.

What he would do then, in this parched land where even the masters of the penal colony were themselves near to starvation, had not seemed important—as it was not. Blaxland knew he was doomed to fail, ten seconds after his white body clove the water. He was tossed, smothered, well-nigh thrown back to be battered into a bloody mass against the sea wall.

A strong swimmer since early boyhood, Blaxland fought with all his strength in the smother of waters, and succeeded only in keeping away from the sea wall until it ended, and the shoreline of Port Jackson stretched to receive him.

A dozen guards now were there waiting. Occasionally one shot, though there was manifestly no need. Grimly Blaxland swam until the last of his strength, depleted by the months on the prison transport, suddenly left his arms and legs. Exhausted, turning blue in the face, he was lifted high by the next breaker and flung into the shallows, there to be turned over and over like a log of dead wood, until the guards waded out and caught him by the arms.

He knew nothing more until the first stinging bite of the knout across his back brought him to pain and a sort of consciousness. Spread-eagled, arms and legs shackled, he was hanging up-

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right on the gallows-like whipping post.

Thirty strokes, administered with gloating satisfaction by the ape-like Matt Henry, executioner of the prison. His arms, toughened by years of the sledge and anvil previous to convict days, made his knout-wielding a matter of blood and stripes.

Blaxland came awake with a scream in his throat. But he throttled it into a choking gasp, and thereafter—even when he fainted and came back after the last stroke, to find buckets of sea water being sloshed over his prone figure on the ground—his slash of mouth tightened and he made no further sound.

The sea water bit into the welts on his back. When they urged him upright he was naked, and so weak two of the guards had to drag him to the solitary cell which would be his portion for a month.

There was one net gain from it all. He saw no more of the degenerate, Moebus.

LACHLAN MACQUARIE, who might have stopped or ameliorated this punishment, knew nothing at all of the occurrence. The prison warden had full charge of such minor details; and he knew nothing of Blaxland save the bare statement that he had been convicted of treason, cashiered from His Majesty's army, sentenced to three years in chains and banishment from the British Isles for life.

Ironically enough, though his fare was scant and he saw no human being save two surly guards, Blaxland much preferred his solitary confinement to the companionship of Moebus. Heavily chained, he spent nearly double the usual time in sleep, making up much of the exhaustion of the past months. During waking hours he forced himself to exercise systematically, gradually bringing tone to his long, supple muscles, in spite of the bad air and food.

"Sometime there will come a better chance," he told himself grimly. "I'll be ready!"

He tried hard to apply for the chance to make the explorer's attempt through the constricting barrier of the Blue Mountains. But the guards would not even transmit the message. This month a convict named Fessenden was chosen. He was given a light pack of equipment, knife, hatchet, flint and steel, and provisions for ten days. He was escorted out to the foothills near where now is Parramatta, and earnestly bidden Godspeed by Lachlan Macquarie himself.

The eighth day following, one of John MacArthur's sheepherders found him crawling on hands and knees. One leg was broken from a fall, and he was dying of thirst, having been unable to reach water after his accident in a rocky gorge.

Restoratives failed; and he died the next morning. This had a sobering effect upon the candidates for the prizes. A number of the more timid settlers who had been getting ready to try drew in their horns. Only a Lieutenant Wentworth, with a comrade, started out—taking with them a palpably absurd amount of impedimenta, which they were forced to cache before they had penetrated the mountains a distance of one-half mile.

A food ship did come then from England, which relieved the terrible stringency. But the rations in her hold were weevily and almost inedible. They had been what chandlers called "guff" in the first place; and the stormy, overlong sea passage made

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them truly foul. Just the same, the colony at Botany Bay received them with prayers of thanksgiving.

Bathurst had sailed with the prison transport. He had struggled with his feelings and his conscience in respect to Blaxland. In the end he had sworn to himself to do something for the youth on reaching England; but he had sensed that Blaxland himself would misconstrue any prison visit, thinking it false pity. So he did not even leave a message.

Lachlan Macquarie, as soon as the lists of convicts with their sentences were put before him, commuted all the terms by a deduction of five months. He paused, frowning, with his quill pen hovering above Blaxland's name. But he put off action there, meaning to have a talk with the convict. The press of the food ship's arrival put the matter out of mind for the time being.

Deaths among the convicts who had just arrived numbered at least two each day during this month. One scarlet week at the last of the month eighteen succumbed to the various weaknesses and diseases contracted during the voyage.

The soil was clay and gravel, iron hard. The feet of the splendid Merino sheep raised by MacArthur and others had trodden the surface into dust; but below that the drought had an even harsher grasp. Burying the bodies of dead convicts had become a nightmare task.

CHISHOLM, warden of the prison, tried sinking them in the bay; but two days later the crab-mutilated carcasses were disgorged upon the beach and had to be buried anyway.

So convicts were told off as burying squads. It was punishment duty that all abhorred; so that was why George Cecil Blaxland was chosen. Chisholm had not yet been informed that any favors were to be given this red scorpion of a man, desperate and dangerous. So with a hoarse-voiced bull of a man with a black beard, a veritable Hercules who had fought his way bareheaded out of an English prison only to be recaptured three days later, Blaxland was set to digging a long trench which would hold the bodies of four convicts.

Three guards with muskets and fixed bayonets kept careful watch over their toil. Both these men were known to be willing to accept the most desperate odds; and it was strange that all three guards, getting one startled look into the cold blue fire of Blaxland's eyes, counted him the worse of the two.

The black-bearded fellow, whose name was Moss, grumbled in his barrel chest with every grating spadeful he turned, occasionally bursting forth in an inarticulate, coughing roar like that of a caged lion being tormented.

Blaxland swung a pick methodically, glad of this form of exercise. He had sized up the situation, and decided that nothing offered a promise of escape. So he worked well and quietly. Good conduct might cause vigilance to be somewhat relaxed in the future.

But fate sets off its fireworks without regard to the auspiciousness of occasion.

Two of the guards, half alert, stood behind Moss. The third guard, who happened to be the same irascible fellow whom Blaxland had hurled into the bathing pool, stood directly behind the red-haired convict, his bared bayonet never more than twenty inches away from the gleaming muscles of Blaxland's bare shoulders.

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This guard wanted only a shadow of an excuse. His teeth emitting faint grinding sounds, he waited. Just one false gesture with that pick, and Blaxland would have twelve inches of triangular steel rammed into his backbone...

Gorilla-like, Moss touched off the fuse. Like a grouchy old bear he had grumbled, roared, and subsided, only to break forth again. Everything about this job infuriated him, especially the cool, efficient fellow convict with whom he was paired.

Moss had no thought of escape. But as a half hour passed he began to find it impossible to restrain his churlish temper.

He suddenly erupted. One roaring cough, and he straightened from the trench, lifting a spadeful of clay and gravel and flinging it straight into the face of his astonished fellow convict!

Then as if crazed by this partial letting-off of steam, he scrambled forward out of the trench, swinging his spade high over his head, with the intent of braining Blaxland then and there.

The two guards behind him fired simultaneously; and the heavy musket balls tore through Moss's chest from behind. He pitched forward, red froth bubbling from his lips, and slowly slid back into the half-dug trench. He would be violent no more, but would be accorded the place of honor in this grave he had helped to dig.

That was the least important part. Surprised by the shower of clay and gravel, which an upflung arm barely kept from his eyes, Blaxland staggered back two steps.

That was almost the chance the irascible guard behind him had been looking for. Not a chance to kill the prisoner, perhaps, but a good chance for a measure of vengeance. With a satisfied snarl on his lips, he thrust forward the bayoneted musket, jabbing the keen steel four inches into Blaxland's thigh.

"Back to work, ye slother!" he snarled. "If there's fightin' to be done—"

The double report of musketry cut short his words. And that instant Blaxland, involuntarily leaping at the pain in his leg, half-whirled. The knowledge flashed through the red-head's brain that two of the three guards had fired their muskets, and would not be able to reload for at least forty seconds. Here was a chance for escape, with only one man barring the way!

All that inspiration had come in one-tenth of a second after the report, Blaxland's mind working like chain lightning. With not even a hesitation, the action seeming continuous, he gripped the pick handle in his right hand and swung it sidewise with all his strength—against the grinning guard who had pricked him!

Even then the convict had kept his head. He turned the double-pointed pick sidewise, so while the guard was smashed from balance, and would nurse a broken forearm as well as an augmented inner fury, it was not murder.

The guard screamed in a high-pitched voice, falling to the ground and dropping his musket.

Instantly Blaxland stooped, seized the musket — useful only for the bayonet which could be detached later —and with pick in his other hand he turned and sprinted with all his speed for the quarter-mile distant scrub which encroached from the foothills of the mountain barrier.

By the time the two other guards had shouted the alarm lustily, and had

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reloaded their firearms, the bell atop the main administration building was tolling the message of escape.

Lachlan Macquarie found out, just a few minutes later, that the convict he had intended to appoint to a light task of some description about the offices had disappeared after overcoming an armed guard.

"But we'll get him in a week," promised the aroused prison warden. "And this time I'll have Matt Henry cut him to pieces with the knout!"

The governor frowned at this threat, but he said nothing. After all, prison discipline had to be maintained; and probably this red scorpion, as the guards called him, was far more of a villain than the sensitive Lord Bathurst imagined.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIRST BUSHRANGER.

THE eastern side of the Blue Mountains is vertical chaos, as far as travel is concerned. In physical appearance it is something like northwestern British Columbia in the Cascade and Coast Ranges. Soil is thin or non-existent, and rock is everywhere.

Canyons with sheer rocks for faces, and a multitude of seepage waterfalls lacing down the forbidding cliffs, run everywhere. The mountains themselves are only about 3,500 feet in height; but the canyons actually drop below sea level, and the contrasts are appalling.

A thin, discouraged mallee scrub exists part way up the mountains. Below that, in seasons of rain, there is grass and some other vegetation. Above that on the eastern side, nothing.

The bottoms of the gorges look from the heights as though strewn with roses. The truth is terrible. Tangles of prickly pear impenetrable to man or horse have grown there ten feet deep. What seem to be roses are the bright red fruit of this plague plant.

Tough goanna lizards six feet in length live there. The kookaburra or laughing jackass flutters, and yells his strident derision.

Apostle birds in their invariable groups of twelve sit around and debate momentous affairs between their meals of pear fruit.

They are harried, like so many savants tormented by urchins in their deliberations, by scores of cheeky little bower birds, who exist to annoy. Noisy minahs (soldier birds) squawk as they fly; and the tiny kangaroo mice come out to dance under the hot moon.

But none of these creatures is acceptably edible for man. True, goanna flesh has been eaten by starving men—just as the chuckwalla of the American deserts and the rattlesnake have been eaten in pinches—but the goanna is coarse of flesh, and is said to taste like sheep dip.

George Blaxland gained the first clumps of mallee—dwarf and tired-looking eucalyptus—which dotted the dusty sheep range back of the town of Sydney and the convict barracks. Here was the first crucial test of escape. Thirty-four miles of rolling, somewhat broken, but almost shelterless land lay between him and the first gorges of the mountains. The small streams here had dried up months ago. He would be pursued immediately, probably by the prison's prize pair of blacktrackers imported from Van Dieman's Land.

Once out of sight, the fugitive detached the bayonet and flung away the musket. The eighteen inch triangular needle of steel was a splendid weapon

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for close personal combat, but a lot of grinding and honing on stones would have to be done before it could serve as a knife.

"Maybe I can make a spear and use it for a point," reflected Blaxland, slowing his dogtrot now to a long, distance-eating stride. Behind him the bell tolled the alarm, and there were faint noises of activity in and about the barracks; but so far there was no dust of a pursuing party in the still, dry air.

A dull, rolling rumble caused him to look up, startled. Far ahead there, above the height of the mountain barrier, a black storm cloud was rising. Its opaque heart was split asunder by the crooked tines of forked lightning. A storm coming! It had not rained for eight months in Sydney; and with the other newcomers, Blaxland had rather taken for granted that it never did rain. If the mountains only did not condense all the moisture now in those clouds—why, he would be safe from pursuit!

More than that, the sheep raisers and farmers would be so overjoyed at rain, that they would forget all about the escape of one probably crazy convict, fled to perish in the wild gorges of the Blue.

Just the same, Blaxland cut away at an angle from the straight line of flight, and sought a high, rocky ridge. Here his footprints did not show at all to an untrained eye; and with help of wind and perhaps rain, he hoped they would be too scant sign for even blacktrackers. These strange but highly skilled natives had the reputation of being able to follow cold and invisible spoor, where even bloodhounds were at fault.

Though he never once saw them, at almost this very moment of afternoon they were put on his track. They followed for perhaps two miles—and then deluging rain descended. Chisholm, the warden, and the guards with him, then called back the blacktrackers.

"We'll pick him up sooner or later," said the warden grimly. "Ain't a bit of use taking too much trouble, with those mountains for our outside prison walls. Can't get away anywhere, can he?"

WITH which unanswerable argument the case rested—insofar as the convict settlement was concerned. All sheep stations and farms were warned to be on the lookout for the desperate red-head, who would be driven by famine to some attempt at breaking and entering; or perhaps to a holdup. A reward of ten pounds was posted for George Cecil Blaxland, dead or alive—a contemptuous gesture, indeed, toward a man whose ancestor was that warrior king of the Franks, the father of Charlemagne....

The heavens opened and a cloudburst smote the thirsty land. For two hours, as Blaxland trudged doggedly westward, blinded now by the sheets of water that sluiced into his face, the eight inch layer of dust underfoot still clogged on his feet in rubbery mudballs. Then gradually it changed into a slithery, homogeneous mire, treacherous for footing, but not so heavy. The dry washes and old stream beds became rivulets.

In the blue-black twilight of a thunderstorm sunset they were brimming rivers, hastening with their new loads of silt into the mysterious heart of the mountains, bound for that mythical inner sea of Australia in which the best theorists of that day sincerely believed.

Blaxland made good progress. Just before total darkness came he found

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an empty hut used as a line camp occasionally by sheepherders. Here he flung himself down upon a heap of dry and brittle branches which had served someone as a bed, and slept.

He awoke with the rising sun slanting into his face through the doorless doorway. Refreshed but ravenously hungry, he knew he had to work fast and reach some kind of a base where he could lie hidden. First, however, he had to have food and at least a sketchy outfit if he would survive.

"I'll never be taken alive!" he said aloud. "Better to starve, or to fight it out to the end."

Still carrying the pick, and with the unsheathed bayonet thrust backward through the waistband of his trousers, he started on westward, seeing a height of land from which he could see the ocean and the town of Sydney—and also from which he might glimpse an outlying farm which it would be possible to raid.

The mountains seemed no more than a mile or so distant in the clear, refreshing morning that followed the storm. Everywhere the ground steamed; and in a miraculously short while the earth, so dead with the long drought, would be sending up new shoots of grass and other verdure. In three days the whole dry valley would be carpeted with flowers and for the time being the drought would be forgotten.

A half hour later the fugitive reached the summit of a bald rock shaped like the prow of a great rusty ship; and from here he scanned all of the ground between himself and Botany Bay. There was no evidence of pursuit, and he turned about, satisfied.

There was no building or sheep station in sight, barring only the empty shack in which he had spent the night. But over the long brown crest of a ridge to northwestward Blaxland discerned a column of smoke which meant human beings.

On the side of the slope, as he climbed, he encountered the gaunt figures of a small band of Merinos. His eyes narrowed as he looked at them. They would have to serve, if he could not get other food soon, though the starved creatures looked as though there would be no meat at all upon them. The thought of raw mutton made him grimace; but the fare of the prison transport had cured him of squeamish nonsense forever.

WHEN he reached the crest of the ridge he took one look—and instantly dropped prone. Almost directly below him, in a sheltered elbow of the higher ground, nestled a one-room cabin of the type later to be known derisively as a *gunyah* (native name for a hut). Extensive sheep pens looked well kept, however; and Blaxland guessed this was one of the small outfits which had copied the idea of John MacArthur.

Smoke still rose from the clay chimney, but no one was in sight. Quietly the fugitive withdrew, then made a half-mile circuit, descending to the valley and approaching the cabin from the direction of the pens.

Though Blaxland gave the matter no thought, he was a truly fearsome object when he dropped the pick and came forward crouching toward the blind side of the cabin. His clippered cheeks and scalp looked on fire with an unholy orange-copper glow. Arms and chest, except for what looked like a fallen Vandyke of red hair just over

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his breastbone, were almost spectrally white.

And if one caught a glimpse of his back and shoulders, they were ribbed white in crosswise scarifications, like a washboard.

The prison dungarees had shrunk from the rain, and were halfway to his knees—and tight about the thighs. He was barefooted, of course; but since reaching Sydney the soles of his feet had toughened. He was not troubled on the plains, though before he could hope to win through the Blue Mountains he would have to get adequate boots somehow.

Fortune had decided to smile on him for a change. He had chanced upon the habitation of one Pete McCulley, who was a hermit sheep raiser through the unanimous though tacit vote of his neighbors—and of the townsmen and settlement officials as well.

McCulley was a black Scot, six feet three of stature, and with brows that made one jet smudge across his low forehead. He had been branded in Glasgow with the block T, which warned every chance acquaintance that he was a twice-convicted thief. So when he had tried the same game in Liverpool, they gave him short shrift. They cut off his left ear, sentenced him to a year in chains and perpetual banishment from the British Isles.

He had owned some property, though, and so when his chains were struck off and he was free to become an Australian colonist he obtained the money and invested in a band of sheep. The venture had not done well; and yet Pete McCulley's larder was always well stocked, and there were always jugs of white rum buried under the floor of his cabin.

When Pete rode in on his rare trading visits, other men watched him warily, for he was always quarrelsome. He had trained his long black hair to cling wetly to his forehead, covering the T-brand. Yet everyone knew it was there, just as he knew that Pete McCulley would remain a wrong 'un as long as he lived.

This morning the branded hermit was ferocious of temper. He had slept badly, awakening with an attack of shakes before dawn. These had been cured with several swigs of raw rum; but now that he was dressed and up, he felt sleepy again. There could be something done now with the remnant of his herd, since a few days would see the spinifex and more tender grasses green on the hillsides. But Pete let his damper burn while he sat with his head in his hands.

With a curse he threw it out of the door.

The billy was boiling with an extravagant handful of tea in it. He swilled down a pint tin cup of it, cooled and laced with rum, and then momentarily felt better. Stretching, he raised clenched fists and hammered them on the low roof. Then he walked to the open door—only to bring up with a growl of wonder as a pink-headed apparition came from nowhere and thrust the point of a long, keen dagger against his stomach!

"Hands up! Hold them there and back up!" commanded George Blaxland, wishing he had a pistol so he could carry through this act in approved highwayman style.

"Huh!" grunted McCulley, still doubting his eyes. "Who are you? And what d'you think to gain from any stand-and-deliver on a lone sheepman? I have no money—"

"Gold's of no use to me," said Blaxland. "Turn about."

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Rapidly he ran a hand over the giant's anatomy, searching for weapons. There proved to be a long knife in the right boot, but otherwise McCulley was unarmed. Tossing the knife out of the door, the intruder reached around to unbuckle the hermit's belt, intending to use this to bind the giant's wrists.

THAT was the Scot's opportunity, and he made use of it. Suddenly bending forward away from the knife point, he thrust back one leg in a raking motion. Surprised, and with no intention of doing more than threaten with the bayonet anyhow, Blaxland found his own legs swept from under. He fell heavily, dropping the bayonet. And with a roar of malicious triumph, the branded hermit swung completely about and dove for him on the floor, great arms extended for the bear hug of the rough-and-tumble battler.

A fencer of fair skill, and champion of his form at Eton at schoolboy fisticuffs, Blaxland was agile for a six-footer. He partially dodged the diving lunge, and slammed over a terrific right hook to McCulley's ear as the latter descended.

As a result the surprised hermit found his forehead and nose smashing down to the floor, while his death grip on the robber did not materialize satisfactorily. McCulley scrabbled awkwardly on the floor, rising to his knees, pawing for the clinch which never had failed to bring him a chance for gouges, bone-breaking, and final victory over an opponent.

He got Blaxland's corded but slender left wrist. But just then the fugitive slammed the heel of his open palm squarely into McCulley's nose. Blood spurted. The blow, even more effective than the impact of a clenched fist, blinded the hermit with pain. His grip on the wrist loosened.

Instantly then Blaxland wrenched free, and came to his knees, then to his feet. One backward step, then a crouch and a powerful uppercut punch as McCulley staggered up to go blindly for him, and there was a crunching impact which no one could mistake.

Even Blaxland knew this was enough. He stepped back. The giant's arms fell limply to his sides. The black irises of his eyes turned skyward. Then he swayed forward slowly, still erect, and fell forward as a ladder falls, striking with a concussion which shook the flimsy cabin.

For a moment then Blaxland feared seriously that he had killed the man—and murder of a free settler who had done nothing to him was not in the convict's calculation. A short examination was reassuring enough, however. McCulley lived. His jaw was canted sidewise, broken, so he would be miserable and vengeful enough, but his heart beat strongly. In a quarter hour or thereabouts he would awaken, and start planning a murderous reprisal.

One glance at the branded T on the hermit's forehead removed Blaxland's last qualm. This was necessity, of course, and he would have despoiled anyone of the outfit he had to have; but it eased conscience to know that the victim was a man who had stolen from other men.

Just as the man on the floor groaned and stirred for the first time, Blaxland quietly left the cabin. On his feet were stout boots, a trifle large but of excellent quality. He wore a flannel shirt, brown corduroy trousers with the ends tucked into the boots, and a broad leather belt from which depended a pis-

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tol, McCulley's knife in sheath, a filled powder horn, a leather pouch of bullets, and a sack containing flint and steel.

On his shoulders rested a light pack containing condiments, flour, sugar, tea, salt pork, a coil of light rope, and a haunch of boiled mutton wrapped in cloth.

Noon found him sixteen miles to westward, in the foothills of the Blue Mountains, apparently unpursued.

Dropping his pack, he lighted a fire for tea and damper.

Australia's first bushranger had taken to the mallee.

CHAPTER V.

TO THE HEIGHTS.

ALONE. The first day or two, finding a deep niche in a canyon wall where he could cut branches and fashion a hidden shelter which would serve as a base camp, the verve and inspiration of escape from chains held up Blaxland's spirits.

Then came inevitable reaction. His first gallant attempts to thread the mazes of canyons, or climb more than a little way toward the high ridge to westward, met with the same rebuffs all the exploring parties—from those of Bass, Governor Hunter, Bareiller and Caley, up to this last unfinished attempt by Lawson and Wentworth—had suffered.

Scaling these vertical rock walls was impossible in most places. Threading the faces of the cliffs, hanging always above a sheer drop to the terrible prickly pear beds below, got nowhere. Each time Blaxland thought he was making progress he came to a dead end and was forced to retrace his steps.

He became moody, thinking of the sweet girl whom he always would love but who doubtless would forget him, after a few days of tears, in the gaiety of London and the attentions of—Bathurst.

"Damn Bathurst!" he gritted aloud. But then he shook his head. The English lord had an excellent reputation. A widower, he had devoted himself to serious things, instead of following the rakehell course too common among his kind.

His courtship of Elspeth had been a dignified and flattering affair; and probably the only reason he had lost out in the first place to the redhead had been the latter's impetuosity. Now it was certain in Blaxland's mind that Elspeth would become Lady Bathurst. Separated forever by the width of a world, and the insuperable barriers of disgrace and banishment from the youth she had loved, that certainly was the common sense solution. Yet what real man ever yielded the first love of his hot-blooded youth to common sense and resignation?

All the while his brain was saying one thing, Blaxland was planning, hoping, striving to overcome in some fashion the insuperable odds. Ten days of complete failure dragged by, and his provisions were almost gone. He had shifted his base camp twice, working gradually northward; but so far even the most reckless climbing and arduous clambering along the rocky falls of the Nepean River had been fruitless. It began to look as though these thousand-foot cliffs extended without a break—save for the roaring torrents which no man could wade or navigate—the entire bow-shaped length of the Blue Mountains.

Blaxland had browned and toughened. His shoulders were broadening,

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his stomach growing flat and plated with muscle. He stooped a little from so much climbing where hands were even more valuable than feet.

He had resolved upon another raid for supplies—other than mutton, which he had killed and eaten whenever he needed fresh meat. So far three of John MacArthur's lambs never would bring wool to the shearing shed; but a straight diet of lamb or mutton palls quickly on any palate.

There was a somewhat larger cabin some two miles to the east. Blaxland resolved to raid it the following night; but that raid was to be postponed, for an unexpected reason.

At sunrise the outlaw emerged from his cave camp to see the smoke of a campfire about half a mile to the west —and higher into the mountains than he thus far had been able to penetrate.

It was the base camp of Lawson and Wentworth, though he did not know that. He set himself the task of climbing and reconnoitering—only to discover to his bitter disappointment that reaching that high shelf from which the smoke arose was a job for two men with ropes.

One man alone could not hope to attain it. At least, not from the approach Blaxland tried. There might be another route through another of the canyons which crossed and crisscrossed back in a bewildering maze.

That must have been the case; for just as Blaxland was turning back he froze, gripping a projection of rock with one hand. Down there, just the other side of a narrow rock divide from the spot of his own camp, he glimpsed a man's figure.

In this lonely land any man at all was a cause for wonderment. But this one, scrambling down over jagged boulders, leaping short distances, climbing rapidly when an obstruction intervened, held the bushranger's rapt attention. Where under God's canopy did he think he was going in such an all-fired hurry?

Then right there in plain sight the ant-like figure halted. He seemed to shove mightily against the brown rock. A piece of it swayed, then rolled over, revealing a black dot which Blaxland guessed to be the mouth of a cave.

The human ant bent down and disappeared.

TEN minutes later, as the bushranger still watched, the man reappeared. He was carrying something on his back now, and hastily he retraced the difficult course he had come. In fifteen minutes he was out of sight, even though Blaxland slid and crawled down to try to follow his path. "Going back to that high camp another way," decided the watcher. "And down there's his cache...."

This raid upon the cave and the provisions, ammunition and tobacco he found plentiful there was an entirely different thing to Blaxland than the armed robbery of the T-branded sheepman, McCulley—though both crimes would be entered against his score as heinous.

Setting his jaw sternly against sentimentality, he helped himself to all he could carry, making a dent in the surplus which the two men had been unable to carry with them into the higher camp.

On leaving, however, he hesitated. With pencil, on the top of a packing case, he scrawled a message:

I expect to pay for all this provender if I win through alive.

G. C. BLAXLAND, *Bushranger.*

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He had coined a word which would resound through Australian history for the next hundred years.

With sufficient essential food now for many days, Blaxland shifted his camp a mile farther to the north. He saw the approach this other explorer had used, and passed it. Leaving the river behind (one stream or another always had seemed the obvious means of attacking the problem of the mountains), he skirted a low, brown ridge. Then on impulse he halted. What could lie on the western side of this hogback which by dint of some hard climbing he surely could surmount?

Making a temporary cache of provisions, he set forth; and two hours later he attained a better coign of vantage than he had won at any time previously. Over at his left and ahead, hidden from view, was that camp of the other men which sent up smoke at regular intervals. They did not seem to be moving forward; and the truth which Blaxland could not guess was that a minor misfortune—a shower of rock dust in Lawson's eyes, causing inflammation—had made them wait three days.

That night Lieutenant Wentworth, visiting their cache again, made the infuriating discovery that they had been robbed by some unknown person named Blaxland. He carried the news over to the nearest sheep station, whence in due course it was reported to the prison warden and Lachlan Macquarie.

If the guards were able to capture the self-styled bushranger now, he certainly would be hanged; and even for the sake of Bathurst the governor would not interfere.

With the clue of his known presence on foot in the broken country near the cache, the prison warden, Chisholm, sent a squad of guards converging from a wide fan formation and closing in on the mountains at this point. It did not seem possible that Blaxland could escape; and the theory was that he had holed up in one of the few caves of the region, probably one where there was some seepage water available.

But in spite of the fact that they bivouacked right there, and searched each day from sunrise till dusk, they failed to catch a glimpse of the badly wanted man.

Blaxland had seen them first. Unable to go back now, even to raid again when these provisions were used, he faced grimly to westward. There on those bleak heights he would find triumph—or death.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BATHURST ROAD.

A FULL week of elimination and failure dragged past. Blaxland had found no way to scale the vertical cliffs, and so had devoted himself to exploring three branches of a canyon all of which elbowed at various angles but kept a general westward direction.

The northernmost of the three led him fully two tortuous miles. He climbed along the side, above the deadly cactus waiting to spear and entangle him in the bottom of the gorge, only to find himself in a cul-de-sac at the end, faced with cliffs of brown sandstone and scaling shale. He had to turn back, jaw set grimly.

Two more chances—perhaps.

On the second canyon side he suffered a fall, bruising one shoulder, arm and hip painfully. But he gritted his teeth and kept on. Time now was get-

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ting precious—time and food. Over there somewhere he realized that a pair of determined rivals were assaulting the heights. They might well be succeeding where a man alone could only fail. If they won through first, then all for which he had gambled would be lost, and his own life forfeited without recourse.

In desperate striving where dogged resolution holds a man to a task called hopeless there almost always is a further urge which becomes a sort of madness. Blaxland knew his love was hopeless. Yet through these days when brain as well as tendons seemed strained to the bursting point he cherished the illusion that up there ahead the sweet face of Elspeth Stuart watched him, smiling with confidence.

"I'll win, and find you somehow!" he repeated aloud many times, refusing to think of the disgrace and the twelve thousand miles of distance that lay between.

The second branch canyon promised more, once Blaxland passed the first precipitous elbow. It angled back to the south, but there was a branch from it going due west. The sides of this looked more shelving and broken. If only he could descend to the bottom of the gorge, hack a way through the cactus, and gain that branch canyon!

The whole of the first day he spent in approach and reconnaisance, finally sleeping right there on the edge of the cactus without returning to his base camp. Time enough to go back for supplies, beyond the cold damper and water he had brought along, when he had made a start through the prickly pear. It towered over him there in the bottom of the gorge, and a strong odor, ranker than any recognized perfume, hung in the heated air.

With sunrise he was up, and hacking a sort of tunnel through which he could crawl across the gorge on hands and knees. It was slow work, for as soon as he had cut an amount of the thorny stuff, it was necessary either to carry it back and out, or else to thrust it piece by piece into the tangle at the sides of the tunnel.

He made one trip back, dragging all he could bind in his rope, when a startling interruption occurred. Up there high to the south, crawling along a shelf of rock—backward into the same canyon he had been traversing—came two human figures linked together by a rope.

His two rivals in this exploration!

Instinctively Blaxland, thinking then perhaps these might be prison guards instead of the explorers, went back into the mouth of his cactus tunnel. He lay down, watching upward, and in a few moments realized that he had not been seen. These were the explorers, and they were fated to meet failure if they followed this canyon back the way Blaxland had come. They appeared to be having a terrible time up there, three hundred feet above the cactus gorge, hauling themselves one by one along a broken shelf, helping each other across gaps....

And then it happened!

One of those human ants appeared to slip a distance of about one inch—on the scale, that is, of Blaxland's vision. Instantly there came a puff of brown dust up there on the side of the cliff.

A rumble of falling rock, faint at first, then mounting to a roar.

Scaling away unevenly, hundreds of tons of the cliff face slid down the eighty-degree angle and crashed into the cactus, not a hundred feet from Blaxland!

"God pity them!" was the horrified

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exclamation wrung from the bushranger.

FOR a half minute he could see nothing, for the brown dust like chemical fumes hung against the cliff side. But then a wind came and it moved sidewise slowly, like a curtain being drawn—and Blaxland scrambled out to his feet, a prayer and a curse of wonder on his lips.

There, perhaps sixty or seventy feet below the vanished shelf, two motionless figures dangled and swayed above vacancy. Their rope, attached to both men's belts, had caught upon some precarious projection, halting their fall!

One moved a little. The other was limp. Evidently the shock and the falling rocks had killed or knocked out one, and hurt the other badly.

Blaxland wasted no time. Within a space of seconds he was at the most favorable spot of approach, and climbing the gritty rock face like a human fly climbs the face of a building. When he chanced an upward look he could see one of the two men writhed a little, lifting an arm, then letting it fall. If only he did not move enough to displace the rope!

The first hundred feet offered three spurs or shelves where Blaxland could relax and take his bearings. He saw then that he had to go far to the side, then follow what looked like a fissure or shelf slanting upward until it was directly under the dangling men.

Twenty minutes later, with both victims of the fall quiet now, he was about fifty feet to one side of the point where the rope had caught, and a little above it. He shuddered to see that the rope had hooked across what appeared to be a rock anvil. The base was wide and heavy enough, but the projection looked as though it could not hold the weight. And the rope was out within a foot of the projection's tip!

In a cold perspiration for all his exertion, and trembling, Blaxland at last crawled to the anvil base. Here he rapidly unwound his own rope from his waist, peered over to gauge the distance to the narrow, slanted shelf below, and then coolly looped his rope under the other in such wise that both loose ends remained in his own grasp. Then sitting astride the anvil, praying that it could stand just one more stress, he eased off the caught rope, and strained until the veins came out like cords in his neck, at the jerk which ensued.

The anvil held, however; and a few seconds later Blaxland breathed in relief. Both limp bodies were on the shelf, and he pulled free the end of his own rope.

From here he had to ease the victims one at a time, to the bottom of the gorge, where he examined them. One man, he who had writhed at the end of the rope, suffered with a broken ankle and caved-in ribs on the right side. He also might have internal injuries from the jerk of the belt, for he too was unconscious now.

The other man was gory of scalp and face, and unconscious with concussion. Both might live, but they would have to have better help than the bushranger could offer.

All the rest of that long winter's day was taken in the task of moving both men back to Blaxland's base camp, and there applying restoratives and rude bandages. The man who identified himself in a husky whisper as Lieutenant Wentworth, came to full consciousness, though he seemed the more badly injured of the two. Lawson was the other's name, and his concussion was serious.

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When night came, Blaxland told them he would go for help.

"I'm squaring up the robbery of your cache," he told Wentworth grimly. The soldier answered nothing, but followed him out of the small circle of firelight, with wondering eyes.

INSULT was heaped upon injury as far as the sheep hermit Pete McCulley was concerned, that night. The self-styled bushranger robber who had made him stand-and-deliver after a bruising fight, returned and held up Pete again with the latter's own pistol!

Pete, awakened from a sodden sleep, fairly foamed at his bandaged mouth. The scoundrel was wearing Pete's boots and corduroy trousers, too! But there was nothing for it. Pete had tasted Blaxland's mettle once, and that was enough. Fully dressed as he always slept, he arose, growling threats, and preceded Blaxland out into the night.

Back at the camp the bushranger curtly explained. These two were important men in Sydney. Pete must go instantly and bring a doctor for them, and competent help. Blaxland motioned him off into the darkness.

"Remember, Pete McCulley," he said in grim conclusion, "I hold you responsible. If harm comes through your neglect, I shall return in the night some time for you!"

With an involuntary shiver, the sheepman set off for the nearest settlement. He had horrors enough that came in the night, without adding this bloodthirsty bushranger to them. Sometime, however, Pete meant to have a revenge on the outlaw which would curdle the blood.

Blaxland moved fast. He gathered a pack of essentials, bade the two unfortunate explorers farewell, and set out in the night. When he had gone far enough toward the cactus tunnel in the gorge, to feel safe from night searchers, he turned in and slept.

At the first streaks of dawn he was up and away, omitting a breakfast fire this time for fear of pursuit. But there was no pursuit. Care of the wounded men claimed all the attention of the helpers Pete McCulley brought. And Blaxland trudged on, reached the canyon where he had started to tunnel through four hundred feet of prickly pear—and found, miraculously, that the tunnel now was unnecessary!

The landslide from above had rolled out over the bottom of the gorge in a long triangle which almost crossed; and under the shale and sandstone the prickly pear had been crushed flat and buried. Blaxland reached the further side, and a wide shelf of rock on which a wagon could have traveled, with no more than a slight struggle of a few moments with thorns!

"It's an omen!" he told himself joyously, seeing how the way mounted now, curving about and going steadily toward a V-notch in the blue wall of mountains. "This is the Bathhurst Road to Eden!"

CHAPTER VII.

KING OF MALLEE.

THERE in the notch of the Blue Mountains the lone white man stood and looked down upon the western slope, and upon the great plain stretching across mallee, desert, mulga and jungle a full two thousand miles, to far-away Northwest Cape on the Indian Ocean.

A breathless wonder filled him, a wonder that grew and grew as he slowly descended. Here was a land

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of giants, of abundant rainfall, of queer wild creatures that squatted on their hind legs like a kangaroo mouse, and leapt—good Lord how they leapt!

The first three big kangaroos Blaxland saw frightened him worse than he frightened them; but soon he realized that they were not dangerous if undisturbed. He kept on. At night he camped, and the next day kept on. He meant to hold the V-notch in sight at his back, but to penetrate a little distance for the sake of killing some fresh meat, and of getting an idea of the country.

It was a mallee scrub, but what mallee! Here the eucalyptus, no more than twenty feet high back at Port Jackson, really reached its glory. It was here the only tree on earth taller than the California sequoia, and deepest green of its luxuriant foliage.

Other trees of immense size were the collibans, the cypress pines, bloodwoods, ironbarks, with kurrajons and other species of bottle trees crowding the spaces below quite as milkweed, pitcher plants and goldenrod crowd the footing in lesser forests.

Almost at once Blaxland got into trouble. A small joey hopped up to him, unafraid, and he seized it—without meaning it any harm, but out of sheer curiosity and a wish to look at it closely. That act nearly cost him his life.

Out of the forest hopped a huge old man kangaroo, chattering fury. One of these will seize a man, and disembowel him with a stroke of a powerful hind leg. But this time Blaxland let go of the joey, dodged, and then when the old man came again, let him have it with the pistol, through the chest. The big kangaroo fell kicking; and Blaxland's meat problem was solved for the little time he had a meat problem.

Making camp right there, he skinned the big wallaby, roasted and ate his fill of the tough meat. In the morning he would start back for his triumph—and his pardon at the hands of Lachlan Macquarie. The route he had come would be difficult but by no means impossible for men on foot. Immediately the way was surveyed and known, however, the prison governor could detail a thousand convicts to road building. In a year, two years, there would be wagon teams hauling settlers into the new country....

The Bathurst Road! Blaxland saw enough to make him supremely happy, even though he could not envision the beautifully engineered, broad concrete highway of the future, with its stream of high-powered cars threading in a couple of hours the barrier of the Blue Mountains which had balked all man's efforts but his own, for more than forty years.

Alas for dreams of immediate pardon, of a ship back to England—and of Elspeth Stuart. Too filled with his own achievement to be sensitive in the manner of those who claim a telepathic sixth sense, Blaxland gloried in the great gum trees which towered above his little camp—and did not suspect that before sunset two score of immensely tall black figures, naked and unadorned save for white striping which made them look, in the dusk, like animated skeletons, peered with fear and wonder at this strange apparition from another world.

To the savage Parrabarras this being, with hair and face the color of the storm sunset, and skin as pale as the browned, dry grasses of the plain, was undoubtedly a species of bunyip (monster)—if, in truth, he was not Molongo or another of the chief demons of the scrub, in person. He seemed rather

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undersized to them, who share with the Kimberley blacks and the Aruntas of the western plains the distinction of being the tallest human beings in the world; yet why should not Molongo or Old Mooldarbie himself appear in any guise he happened to fancy? Surely this fire hair belonged to a demon!

AT sunset the blacks silently withdrew, since they fear the dark and hide from it in their wurleys. But with the first streaks of gray in the sky they were up, chattering and excited. From a distance of a mile or so the awakening white man heard a faint uproar he was to learn was a council or corroborree.

Blaxland had been kept awake part of the night by the slinking dingoes, who wanted the carcass of the kangaroo. This morning he shrugged, and started preparations for breakfast and a quick return.

He was not to make it. The far-off clamor of corroborree ended. Some fifteen minutes later Blaxland looked up with a twinge of horror in his heart, to find himself circled by more than eighty painted black warriors, completely naked, and armed with spears, waddies, and queer-looking black elbows of darrah wood he soon would learn were specimens of that queerest of all weapons, the boomerang.

He quietly stood up, hand on his pistol, looking desperately for a chance to fire and run for it. The chance never came. The circle of blacks slowly closed—not without some of the more timid members edging away to the back of the braver ones.

They closed. Careful not to harm this demon, they nevertheless urged him along, and Blaxland finally saw it was necessary to acquiesce. He accompanied them; and in the village of the Parrabarras there was feasting and rejoicing. Had they not a captive demon who undoubtedly would cast evil spells upon all enemies of their tribe? They would keep him forever....

And Blaxland, finding himself guarded in a special wurley, offered everything a god or demon should have—save liberty—was forced to make the best of a terrible happening.

Months passed. The chill months of summer faded, and autumn — the spring of the Antipodes—arrived, bearing with it another drought and a specter of famine. This was the December when so many of the colonists surrendered, packing up their goods and crowding into Port Jackson to await the coming of the first food ship on which they might return. If they had to be paupers and starve, they preferred doing so in the land of their birth. There was no future in farming or sheep-raising in this dreary land hemmed in by the throttling circle of the Blue Mountains.

On the day before Christmas, when all thirty thousand of the colonists and convicts had been on half rations a fortnight, the food ship did come. Something like a riot occurred when all of the waiting, desperate ones tried to go on board with their effects before even the cargo could be landed.

IN the confusion two passengers came ashore—a heavily veiled young woman, and her brother who acted as her escort. These were the two Stuarts, and they bore with them the King's pardon for a convict named Blaxland....

"I regret exceedingly, Miss Stuart," said Governor Macquarie gravely, "that I can do nothing for you and your brother. Lord Bathurst's efforts for

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Blaxland have been wasted. He is gone—probably dead. It is perhaps the best thing, after all," he concluded with a touch of grimness, "since in that case he cannot be tried for breaking prison, and for robberies committed after his escape!"

He started up then, as did Ronald Stuart, for the girl—borne up through all the trials of the long voyage by the hope of having her fiancé restored to her—had fainted. All in vain. The name of George Cecil Blaxland was stricken from the prison rolls; but three counts, two of them capital charges, remained against him if he ever should return.

The second day following, a grim, stubborn man set forth on horseback to ride the parched sheep range. John MacArthur would never surrender. He saw ruin now, unless rains came almost instantly. Yet he would hang on until his last Merino sheep died of hunger.

In the broken hills of his western range MacArthur reined to a stop. Just ahead there was a slow moving cloud of dust—a band of sheep? He knew of none which should be here.

Then as he rode forward he came upon the most startling sight ever to come to the eyes of a Port Jackson settler. Here were seven almost naked men, six of them glistening black and so tall* that their heads reached even with his horse's ears!

The seventh man was shorter, not much more than six feet—*and he was white!*

Spellbound, MacArthur sat there, hand on his pistol. He saw the white man turn and harangue his six companions in a guttural language unknown. The six spearmen halted, casting lowering glances at the horse and its rider. A horse, of course, was an unknown species of bunyip, to them.

Then Blaxland strode forward. He was the color of Burley tobacco, from the sun, and his red hair and beard had grown long in the eleven months of his captivity and wandering with the nomad Parrabarras. Yet he had a quiet assurance in his manner.

"Sir," he said in a rich, resonant voice, "I bid you carry the news to Governor Lachlan Macquarie that Blaxland, the bushranger, has returned to show him to the road to the interior of this continent! And to claim the full, free pardon promised for success in penetrating the Blue Mountains!"

MacArthur had to know more. Who were these blacks? How had Blaxland managed to control them?

The ex-convict told his story briefly. He had learned the tongue. The tribe had wandered, and after nine months he had gained ascendancy over them, through use of his pistol and through knowledge they did not possess of some simple cooking, and medicine. He had induced six of the finest warriors to accompany him as a bodyguard back into the land beyond the mountains. He had promised that they should return safely . . .

The presence of the blacks was incontrovertible proof that Blaxland had done as he said. So, bidding them go to his home and refresh themselves, the excited sheepman galloped away. His brain was filled with plans for taking the remnants of his sheep bands through the mountains to this wonderland of luxuriant pasturage. Perhaps he could make the grade, after all!

EARLY that evening Lachlan Macquarie, Chisholm, the prison warden, and thirty armed guards came. They were accompanied by all

* Many of these natives are seven feet tall.

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the vehicles and riding horses available at Port Jackson. And miles back of them hundreds walked who could not ride. The news was the most exciting that ever had reached Botany Bay.

One sight of the giant blacks with Blaxland, and Lachlan Macquarie was convinced. He took the bushranger with him and several of his council and listened while Blaxland gave a brief chronicle of his eleven months beyond the law.

Lawson and Lieutenant Wentworth were there, the latter to corroborate a part of the tale, and also to grip the hand of the man who had saved them from a miserable death.

In conclusion Blaxland showed a red-marked map he had made on rough paper hammered out of the pith of the nipa palm. This showed the route, and also two large rivers. One of these flowed to the northwest and seemed to end in great marshes—as far as the Parrabarras had wandered in that direction.

The second river flowed to the southwest, and was a mighty stream with a swift current—probably flowing to the fabled inland sea, as Blaxland believed.

After a study of the route which would become the Bathurst Road, the governor looked at the two rivers. He smiled. He took up a quill pen and wrote one word beside each river. He was naming them. Wentworth, looking over his shoulder, could not restrain a chuckle.

With the simple vanity of a great man, the governor had named the southern river the Lachlan, and the northern stream the Macquarie!

"Your black warriors will not molest my men when we go to prove this claim?" he asked. "Not that I doubt, but a road which we can use is an imperative necessity."

"I am chieftain of the Parrabarras," said Blaxland quietly. "I guarantee that they will be friends."

"A sort of king of the mallee," grinned Wentworth.

But now Lachlan Macquarie had his dramatic moment. "In respect to yourself, Mr. Blaxland," he said momentously. "Of course you broke prison, and committed certain robberies in order to secure provisions for your exploration. Ahem!"

Here he looked about, with not the ghost of a smile. The bushranger slowly paled, and his hand stole to the butt of his pistol. Was this respected governor going to welch on his word? Had all this striving been in vain?

"However," continued Macquarie ponderously, "I give you a full and free pardon for your prison break, and for those robberies committed afterward. I cannot, I grieve to say, pardon you now for the treason you committed in England."

"What?" cried Blaxland sharply. "That was the proclamation you—"

Here Macquarie permitted himself a beginning smile. "I cannot pardon you—because the pardon was granted in England full five months agone! Wentworth, will you ask the king's messenger, bearing the pardon, to step into this room?"

The lieutenant obeyed. To the open doorway came Elspeth Stuart, clad in the dusty veils of her journey from Port Jackson. Her eyes were filled with tears of happiness, though, and she had freshened her cheeks.

"Blax!" she said, in her well-remembered, husky, throbbing whisper. She lifted her arms, inviting him . . .

THE END

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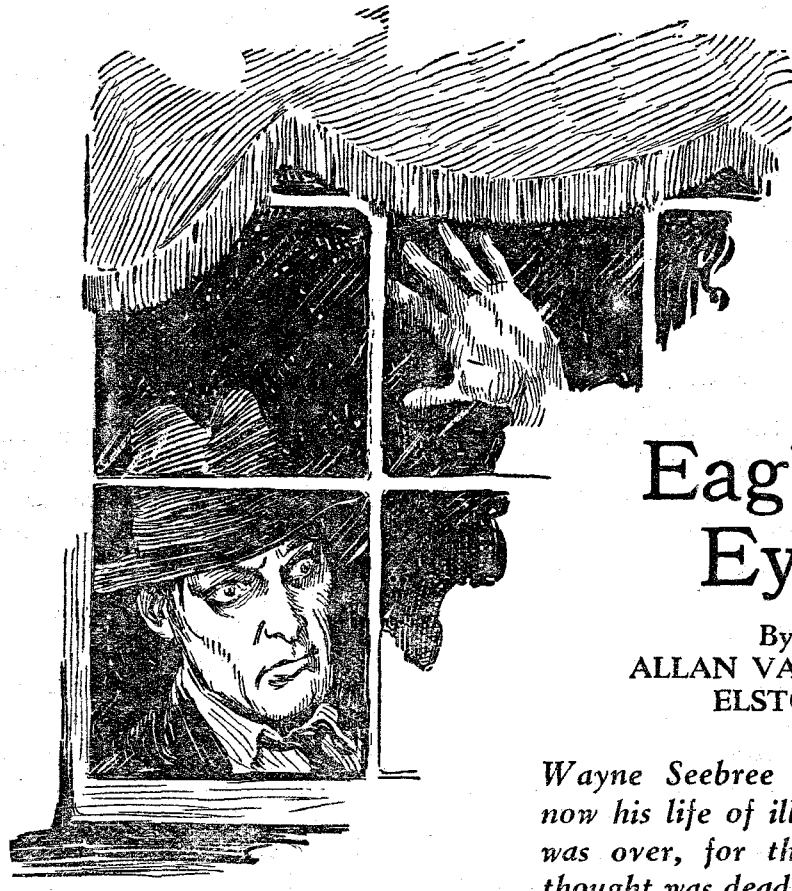

Eagle's Eye

By
ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

Wayne Seebree knew that now his life of illicit luxury was over, for the man he thought was dead came back to haunt him

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

WAYNE SEEBEE'S valet, Slake, was an ever-present reminder of their first meeting nine years previously on the South Seas tramp steamer, Tonga Belle. Seebree had been picked up from a deserted island on which he had been stranded for seven months. But he had not been alone! Gerry Howden, wealthy New Yorker, had been stranded there with him when Howden's yacht was wrecked, but Seebree said nothing about him to his rescuers when they took him away. Howden had been tending a beacon on the other side of the island. Aboard ship the wiley Slake had noticed a court-plaster pasted on Seebree's back—at a spot on which Seebree's hands could not reach! That bit of observation was to prove profitable to Slake.

Now, nine years later, Seebree thought that Howden could hardly have survived on Skull Island. And he had married Howden's widow, Corrine, who had made him president of Howden Motors and a big name in the financial circles of New York.

Corrine had never liked Slake, and wondered how it was that her husband ever employed him as valet. One night Slake asks Seebree for a cool hundred thousand, and Seebree decides that he will have to do away with Slake. So while Slake is out at Jersey Elms, the secluded country home of the Seebrees, Wayne shoots him.

This story began in the Argosy for October 19

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Unfortunately there is a coincidental murder of a young girl, Flora Sawyer, who was employed by the Seebrees for a time during the summer months. Her body is found not far from Slake's. Tom Eagle, D. A. of this rural New Jersey county, an alert, keen Cherokee Indian, undertakes a minute investigation of the murders and seeks to link them.

CHAPTER VI.

A GHOST WALKS.

WAYNE SEEBREE paced his office on the top floor of the Howden Building, his brain in a riot of harassed imaginings. He had left home early this morning, and here at the office had denied himself to all callers. Some keen analyst, he feared, might read the guilt on his face.

Fear haunted him. Not fear of Slake, for Slake was dead. But fear of himself, of the panic in his own eyes and his jittery nerves. His heart was thumping; his face was drawn in hard, taut lines. It seemed to Seebree that any man need only to look at him and instantly mark him for a murderer.

The ringing of his telephone made him jump. Confound it, he had told them he wasn't to be disturbed. But the phone rang persistently, and when Seebree answered the girl in the outer office told him it was his wife. Corrine, of course, could not be denied. For Corrine it was who owned the entire business, all the fortune and vast affairs managed by Wayne Seebree.

"Well?" he said to her in a strained voice.

"Wayne," he heard his wife say, "who do you suppose just called me?"

"Who?"

"A Mr. Eagle. You've heard of him, haven't you? That Indian who's district attorney out at Kittatinny."

Seebree almost dropped the telephone. The cold beads of moisture oozed from his forehead. Eagle! Was that Indian on his trail already?

"What did he want?" Seebree asked hoarsely.

"He was asking about Flora Sawyer."

"Who is Flora Sawyer?"

"Naturally you wouldn't have noticed her, Wayne. But she's a farm girl we've hired at Jersey Elms, the last three or four summers."

Seebree gulped. His panic increased, for he thought he saw it all now. That yokel kitchen maid must have been somewhere on the road, last night; she must have seen and recognized Seebree. And this morning, Slake's murder being discovered, she must have mentioned the fact to authorities.

"I'm frightfully busy, Corrine," Seebree said from a dry throat. Before he could protest further he heard his wife say, "She was killed last night, Wayne."

"What? *She's* been murdered?" Seebree gasped.

His odd accent on the pronoun caused Corrine to answer: "Yes. That's what I said. You talk as though you expected someone else to be murdered."

"Naturally it's a shock, dear," Seebree said shakily, "since the girl worked for us. I'm dreadfully sorry to hear about it. But really, I barely knew her. So why do you—"

"Mr. Eagle asked if anyone from here has been out to Jersey Elms lately. At first I said no. Then I remembered Slake. Slake went there to get his things last night, didn't he?"

"That was my understanding."

"He hasn't returned yet, Wayne."

There was a silence. Seebree's head was buzzing like a beehive. Slake, he

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knew, would never return. Slake was dead. And where did Flora Sawyer come into it?

Someone was mixed up, he thought wildly. Was it himself? Was it Corrine? Or was it Eagle? Eagle should be inquiring about the murder of Slake. Dammit, there couldn't be *two* murders!

Seebree's panic quickened. *Two* murders out there would make Eagle twice as inquisitive. What ghastly luck to have an ex-kitchen maid of his own household murdered out there last night, in addition to a valet!

Then Seebree grasped at a straw of hope. If the girl really was murdered, then someone other than himself had committed the crime. Definitely he was innocent on that particular score. But someone wasn't. Some bungling farmhand lover, no doubt. Eagle would speedily track such a person down. And having proved one murder, Eagle might reasonably assume that guilt in the other case lay at the same door.

Corrine was asking, "Do you suppose Slake had anything to do with it, Wayne?"

Seebree summoned a tone of impatience. "I haven't the faintest idea. If that is all, I'm busy now, please."

He hung up.

Yes, he thought, that second murder might easily prove a life-saver for himself. A providential red herring across the track of his own guilt! It was a pure coincidence, he supposed. Or was it? If not, in what strange manner were the two crimes linked? Seebree paced his office floor, puzzling, weighted with worry.

IT was past noon, he saw. Lunch time. A breath of fresh air might steady him. Seebree decided to eat at the Manhattan Club grill.

He took his hat and cane, then passed into the corridor by way of a private exit. An elevator dropped him thirty floors to the Sixth Avenue level. The usual noon congestion was there. Seebree paused for a moment in the building's foyer for a package of cigarettes.

As he was lighting a cigarette, he became aware of a gaunt, bearded man who stood gazing intently at him. The man was about ten feet away from him, and his stare at first only mildly annoyed Seebree. The stare persisted, with a peculiar quality of challenge. The starer's face was sunken at the cheeks and blistered; the man himself was dressed shabbily. There was a wild look about him, Seebree thought. He did not speak or move, merely stood there with bright, deep-set eyes fixed steadily upon Wayne Seebree.

There was nothing either bold or timid about him. He did not advance; neither did he retreat. Certainly he did not menace Seebree. But he continued to stare, and the stare transfixed Seebree. It was a hot, hungry stare, definite and personal.

The force of it impelled Seebree to stare back. Then the shock of recognition all but paralyzed Seebree. His knees buckled. The blood drained from his face. He steadied himself with a hand on the cigar counter. Was it a ghost he saw?

Gerald Howden! Gerry Howden or Gerry Howden's ghost stood before him. Here in the Howden Building on Sixth Avenue, New York.

With a half-choked cry Seebree darted past him. He was running like a frightened boy when he reached the outer walk.

A taxi was at the curb. Seebree scrambled into it. He said breathlessly, "Manhattan Club, quick!"

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Then he felt himself riding smoothly along, with the familiar traffic humming on all sides. He blinked, like a man arousing from a stupor. Gerry Howden! But that was impossible. It was too fantastic. His brain must have played him a trick. Nine years ago he had left Howden marooned on Skull Island, and Howden had not been seen since. Long ago, in that South Seas wilderness, Howden surely must have perished.

Therefore the man could not now walk in the flesh before Seebree, here on the sidewalks of New York.

With a desperate effort, Wayne Seebree reassembled his shattered nerves. He got out at the club, went inside and had lunch. Just as he finished, Gilbert Chardell came over and joined him.

"What say, Wayne?" Chardell slapped him heartily on the back. "By the way, I braced a bank about that Long Island option."

Seebree stared vacantly. "What are you talking about?" he asked irritably. He wasn't interested in any scheme of Chardell's. The sleek, handsome face of his guest irked him. He realized now that he never had liked the man. Chardell was too smooth, too silky, too indubitably on the make.

"The bank thinks it's a great buy, Wayne," Chardell went on. "But it takes credit a bit over my head. Now if you'd be a good egg, Wayne, and go on the note, I could put it over."

Seebree was braced defensively. He had troubles enough without getting himself stung by Chardell. He twisted away from the ingratiating hand Chardell had laid on his shoulder.

THEN he remembered that Chardell's wife was one of Corrine's closest friends. Therefore he mustn't be brusque.

"I might, at that, Gil," he said vaguely. "I'm head over heels in a merger deal right now. Soon as I have time, I'll get my attorneys to look the property up."

"But it won't wait," Chardell pleaded persuasively. "The option expires Saturday of this week. It's a chance in a lifetime, Wayne. An outright steal."

The man went on with a fast, high pressure line of talk, extolling the merits of his speculation. Seebree barely listened. His own mind was engaged with affairs out in New Jersey. And with Gerry Howden. Had he really seen Howden? If so, where did it fit in? Were there really two murders? Damn Chardell! Why didn't the man quit pawing him?

"I can't be rushed," Seebree broke in at last. "Work's calling me. See you tonight."

Seebree hurried out of the club. At the street he looked both ways for a taxi. He saw none. But he did see a tall man, shabby and gaunt, on the opposite curb. The man was staring at him. Earnestly. Personally. The same man! Howden!

Or was someone made up to resemble Howden? Could it be a trick masquerade?

Nerve again deserted Seebree, and panic flogged him. He turned and walked swiftly down the avenue. After a block, he looked fearfully back over his shoulder. The man had not moved. But he was still staring after the retreat of Seebree. Howden, Seebree remembred, was a member of the Manhattan Club. Therefore no man had a better right to stand in front of it. And Gerald Howden, if he lived, owned the Howden Building downtown. No man had a better right to stand in its lobby. Would he go there again?

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Seebree walked miles. Exercise, he hoped, might shake the cobwebs out of his brain. This was ridiculous. Just because he had killed Slake last night, today he was seeing ghosts. For a second time Seebree so convinced himself. Then, in midafternoon, he returned to his downtown office.

And there, directly in front of the elevator, stood Howden. Gaunt, shabby, bearded, but nevertheless Gerry Howden. He did not speak. He did not accuse. He did not touch Seebree. He merely stared with a challenge of infinite concentration, as he stood there all but blocking Seebree's path.

Seebree managed to get by him and into the elevator. His heart thumped madly and his head roared. He knew for certain now. He knew with terrible consternation that it was Howden.

Which meant that he was Corrine's husband. Her only legal husband! It meant that for years his own relation with Corrine had been illegal. And his own grasp on Corrine's fortune not worth a straw!

Gerald Howden need only identify himself, which he could do at any time, and Wayne Seebree would be exposed. Woman and fortune would slip from him. Worse, Seebree could and would be accused of a treacherous try at murder, a plot to gain Howden's place in the world by deserting him to die on Skull Island.

Then why, wondered Seebree, *didn't* Howden come forward with his claim? Why did he merely stand and stare at Seebree? By the time Seebree reached his private office the answer seemed to him reasonably clear. Howden must only recently have escaped from that prison of palms. Now he was bitter against Seebree. Nine years treacherously deserted on that island must have left him half savage. Like a wounded beast he must have lived there in the jungle, heaping fearful incriminations upon Seebree.

NOW he was here stalking Seebree,
Like a panther stalking a mouse.

No doubt his half-crazed brain was seething with revenge. He must surely mean to kill Seebree. To strike back must be his immediate goal and obsession, rather than to regain wife and fortune.

Howden would shoot him down on the streets, or knife him, or throttle him, or club him as he would a jungle snake.

Protection! In a new wave of panic Seebree knew he must have it. He reached for the telephone, then drew back his hand in confusion. How could he call the police? The police, before affording him protection, would insist on knowing Howden's identity and motive. And if the police were told the man's name and motive, they themselves would prosecute Seebree. As matters stood, the title of a felon fit Seebree, not Howden.

But he must have protection. As Seebree's mind groped frantically, he remembered a man named Fritchie. Ray Fritchie would be just the one to serve him. He knew that Fritchie, although of sufficient external culture to mix in the best social circles, was really a professional bodyguard. A tea-drinking gunman. He could employ Fritchie ostensibly as his private secretary, and take him back and forth between home and office.

He could keep Fritchie and Fritchie's competent gun by him at all times. He need tell Fritchie nothing—except that he wanted protection.

Seebree lifted the telephone receiver and gave a number. A voice answered him. It was Ray Fritchie's.

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"Wayne Seebree speaking. Yes, Seebree of the Howden Motor Corporation. Are you busy?"

"Not too busy to earn an honest dime," Fritchie answered.

"Then come immediately to my office."

"Okay. I'm on my way."

Seebree hung up. He mopped damp beads from his face, then looked into his office mirror. He was desperately pale, he saw. His own stark terror and guilt stared back at him. He turned, paced the floor, thinking desperately. Howden! Howden alive in New York, and ready to challenge or assault at any minute! Why try to buck a thing like that? Everything seemed hopeless, futile. The thought of Slake's murder came like a bleak irony. That was the most futile of it all. A labor of crime lost. For of what use to be rid of Slake when he had Howden?

Should he wait for Howden's attack? Why not catch a train for the west and never be seen again?

Then Seebree saw a good reason for *not* taking such an abrupt flight. The reason was Slake's murder. Slake's murder trapped him. If Slake's master should now disappear, even a third-rate cop would guess that it was because master had murdered valet. Instantly Wayne Seebree would have that Indian, Tom Eagle, on his trail.

No, he didn't dare run. Not for a few days anyway. Yesterday he might have run, but not today. Slake's murder was like a shackle, chaining him to the menace of Howden.

AND now Seebree thought he understood why Slake last evening had demanded a lump sum payment of blackmail. For three years the petty graft of an overpaid valet's job had satisfied Slake. Then suddenly the man had demanded, in his own crafty way, a cool hundred thousand. Why? Obviously because Slake knew about the return of Howden.

Howden no doubt had arrived yesterday in New York. Perhaps he had planted himself in front of the Riverside Drive residence, to stare a baleful challenge when Seebree emerged from the house, to confound and confuse Seebree as he had done today downtown.

Slake, seeing him so posed, might have accosted him. Slake had been a nosey fellow, the kind to ferret things out. And the minute Slake became aware that Howden survived, he would see that his own game was up. The weight of his own threat to expose Seebree would be dissipated. Therefore Slake had promptly struck for a single large payment, hoping to collect it before it was too late.

That, Seebree was sure, was the method of it. The sudden demand of Slake and the appearance of Howden came too pat for it to be otherwise.

Now Seebree again lifted the receiver and spoke into the phone.

"I'm expecting a Mr. Fritchie," he said to the exchange desk girl in his reception office. "When he comes, send him right in. But please don't let anyone else disturb me."

A few minutes later Ray Fritchie entered the office. He was a breezy, dapper young man, slight, slim and sure of himself. In dress he was a tailor's model. But Seebree knew that Ray Fritchie had once been employed as the personal bodyguard of a Wall Street multi-millionaire.

"Sit down, Fritchie," Seebree said. "I need a private secretary."

Fritchie smoothed the tip of a thin black mustache, gazed piercingly at Seebree for a moment, then his left

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eyelid dropped slightly. "I get it," he said. "You're afraid of somebody."

Seebree shrugged. "Who isn't? But now that you mention it, I *have* had a few threatening letters in the mail. All men of my position get them. Sore-headed losers in some stock deal, I suppose. Getting down to brass tacks, I *do* need protection. I want you to go back and forth between home and office with me for the next week or so."

Again Fritchie allowed his eyelid to droop slightly. "The afternoon papers are out, Seebree," he said bluntly. "They say your valet got bumped off last night. And a corn-fed girl out in Jersey. That got anything to do with it?"

"Of course not," Seebree protested quickly. "And you're not being hired to ask questions. Your job is to take care of anyone that makes a pass at me. Understand?"

"Sounds simple, anyway. I'll take a whirl at it."

"You'll have a room at my house, of course," Seebree said.

Fritchie's lips parted, exposing even, white teeth. "And you tell your wife I'm your seck, is that it?"

"That's it."

"Will she believe it?"

"She'll think it's the most natural thing in the world. She thinks I've been overworking. When she came in from a show last night she found me buried in papers."

"All right, Seebree. Who else is out there?"

"A couple of guests, the Gilbert Chardells. But they'll be leaving in a day or two."

"Chardell? I've heard of him. The wise word is that he's a smoothie, a high pressure con man. Where does he fit in?"

"Nowhere," Seebree asserted impatiently. "And please quit trying to make a Chinese puzzle out of it."

"Okay, Seebree. I'm ready to go to work right now."

"Then go pack a bag. Call for me at five-thirty, with a taxi. We'll take home a portable typewriter and a couple of brief cases, to make it look good."

"I'll be here," Fritchie promised, and breezed out of the office.

A few minutes later the outside office rang Seebree again.

"A gentleman to see you, Mr. Seebree," the exchange girl said.

"I'm busy; and I told you I'm not to be disturbed," Seebree said angrily.

"But the gentleman says it's important. He insists on a word with you, Mr. Seebree."

Seebree's blood turned cold. Howden! Who else could it be but Howden?

Then he heard the girl say—"It's a Mr. Eagle."

"Oh!" exclaimed Seebree. Relief wilted him. Eagle was bad enough, but infinitely less hazardous than Howden.

"Show Mr. Eagle in," he said.

CHAPTER VII.

AN ECHO FROM THE ISLAND.

CONSCIOUSNESS of guilt made Seebree expect Eagle to come in stern and accusing. But to his surprise and relief, the tall Indian who confronted him did so with a shy deference. Tom Eagle was a mild man. This was Seebree's first close contact with him, although he had heard much of this tall straight lawyer with raven black hair and high cheekbones—a celebrity on more counts than one, for Tom Eagle held a Congressional medal of honor for courageous service at Belleau Wood.

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With a quiet dignity Eagle said, "Sorry to bother you, Mr. Seebree, but I need your help."

"You're the D. A. out at Kittatinny, aren't you?" Seebree greeted with a forced cordiality. "Won't you sit down?"

He offered a cigar, which Eagle declined.

"You had a valet named Slake?" the caller asked.

"That's right. How did you know? By the way, I fired him yesterday." Seebree's hand trembled slightly as he lighted his own cigar.

"He was murdered last night."

Although he knew all about it, Seebree affected surprise. "Murdered? You mean Slake? Why, I thought it was a girl named Sawyer!"

"A Flora Sawyer has also been murdered. I telephoned your wife about it, and perhaps she told you. Later I found the body of Slake."

"Where?"

"In front of your country place in Jersey."

Seebree stared. "You mean the girl was there too?"

"No. The girl was found two or three miles up the road. The same gun killed them, Mr. Seebree."

"The devil you say! I can't understand it." This time Seebree did not need to affect astonishment. The entire complication of the girl confused him. How, he wondered, could the same gun, his own gun, have killed them both?

"I want to find out all I can about Slake," he heard Eagle say. "How long, Mr. Seebree, have you employed him?"

"Three years."

"He came to you on whose recommendation?"

"No one's. I met the man nine years ago, and he did me a service. So when he popped up six years later and asked for a job, I was grateful enough to take him on as valet."

"He had been a valet by trade?"

"No. He'd been a ship's steward."

"That was his occupation when you first met him?"

"Yes. On a freighter called the Tonga Belle."

"Of course. I remember the story of that rescue, Mr. Seebree. It was quite a sensation at the time. A yacht was wrecked, wasn't it? And you were the sole survivor?"

"That's right. I was picked off an island half dead." Then Seebree, with a start, remembered that Gerald Howden was alive and could prove it at any moment. So he added hastily: "At least, as far as I know I'm the only survivor of that wreck. I was alone on a bit of land called Skull Island for seven months, and saw no human until the Tonga Belle picked me off."

"Slake, steward of the ship, did you a service?"

"Yes. He nursed me back to health on the trip home. After that I didn't see him for six years."

"Who was skipper of the Tonga Belle?"

"An old fellow named Wesley Jones. He's retired from the sea, now."

"Do you know where I could get in touch with him?"

"As it happens, I do. But why do you want to know?"

"I want to know everything about Slake's past," Eagle said with a smile. "His murder means that he had an enemy. Possibly it was an enemy of long standing."

"I UNDERSTAND," Seebree said quickly. It suited him quite well to have Eagle make inquiry of Skipper Jones. Jones he recalled as an

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easy-going old seaman with whom he himself had gotten along famously. Jones had accepted his own story without the slightest doubt. Jones, therefore, could be counted on to back it up.

He also recalled that Steward Slake had been extremely unpopular on shipboard, constantly at outs with other members of the crew. When Jones told Eagle that, Eagle might be inclined to assume an old feud between Slake and some sailor.

Anything to pull a herring across the true trail of guilt, thought Seebree.

"I understand," he repeated. "And it happens that I ran into Skipper Jones only a few months ago. He told me he retired from the sea and is now living in a colony with other retired skippers at New London, Connecticut."

"I should like to talk with him," Eagle said.

"Oughtn't to be any trouble about that, Major." Seebree made an effort to be hearty. "Wait a minute, I'll have a clerk find out if Jones is at home in New London."

Seebree spoke through the phone to his outer office. "Put in a call, please, to Wesley Jones, retired sea captain, New London."

"That is kind of you, Mr. Seebree," Eagle said. "And now about your own relation with Slake. You discharged him?"

"I did. Just before dinner time yesterday."

"Had he been dishonest or incompetent?"

"Not at all. To tell the truth, Major, I had nothing against the man myself. He was a fair servant. But Mrs. Seebree never did like him. Slake's appearance was not prepossessing, you know."

The keen black eyes of Eagle fixed steadily upon Seebree. They neither accused nor rebuked, but they did disconcert Seebree. He became aware that his cigar was out. He was relighting it when Eagle asked, "You told him to leave immediately?"

"I simply gave him a month's pay in advance and said that he could leave at will. He said that some of his things were out at Jersey Elms, and would I mind if he went for them. Of course I made no objection, and I took it for granted he went. We know he did now, since you say he has been found there dead."

"No car was there," Eagle said. "Could he have gone by train?"

"He might have, but I doubt it. That would mean a six mile walk unless he hired a taxi at Kittatinny. More likely he got some acquaintance here in New York to drive him out there, and they quarreled over something."

"If a companion murdered him," Eagle said, "then probably the same companion murdered Flora Sawyer five hours later and three miles this way along the road."

Seebree rubbed a hand over his eyes. "It's very confusing," he said.

"The coroner will hold a joint inquiry tomorrow," Eagle announced. "At Kittatinny, of course. Will you have time to testify?"

The question startled Seebree. "I? Why should I testify?"

"Because you discharged Slake and heard him say he was going out to the country house. And because you are the last person who admits seeing Slake alive."

SEEBREE made up his mind quickly. He would dodge this inquest.

It would be too severe an ordeal, he decided, and might break him down.

"I'm under a tremendous pressure of affairs, Major," he said. "Attending that inquest would be extremely in-

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convenient. Why can't you take my deposition covering the incident of Slake's discharge?"

To his relief Eagle answered readily, "I can."

"Good. I'll dictate it right now, and you can take it with you." Seebree buzzed for a clerk. He instructed the clerk to bring a notary.

In the next half hour, Seebree's deposition of testimony was dictated and signed.

"Thank you," Eagle said as he put the paper in his pocket.

Then the exchange desk girl rang in to report that Wesley Jones of New London had been located at home, and was on the wire. Did Mr. Seebree wish to speak with him?

Seebree did not. But Eagle did.

Seebree sat by and heard the district attorney briefly interview the retired seaman.

"You were master of a trading steamer called the Tonga Belle?"

Seebree could not hear the reply. But it was lengthy. He recalled Jones as a wordy old fellow.

"You had a steward named Slake?" Eagle asked.

And next, "When did you last see Slake?"

"You say you discharged him from your ship about three years ago? What for?"

Then Seebree saw Eagle become more alertly interested. "Oh! That may be just the lead we need, Skipper. Slake has just been murdered out in New Jersey, in the county where I am district attorney. The inquest will be held there tomorrow.

"Yes. At Kittatinny. I want you to attend and testify, skipper."

"Yes," Eagle continued after a question from Jones, "I feel sure that what you've just told me will interest the coroner's jury. We lack a motive, and your information definitely suggests one."

"Yes, by all means. One o'clock at the court house. You'll be reimbursed for your train fare, Mr. Jones. Good. Then I'll tell the coroner he can count on you."

When Eagle hung up, Seebree was both curious and alarmed. What peculiar information had Eagle received from Jones? How could it suggest a motive of murder?

However, Seebree refrained from asking questions. Eagle arose, saying: "Thank you, Mr. Seebree. Sorry I took so much of your time. Good day."

Eagle left the office. A minute later Ray Fritchie breezed in. Seebree scowled at him. But he couldn't send him away. He needed Fritchie to guard his own person against the menace of Gerald Howden.

CHAPTER VIII.

CORONER'S COURT.

WHEN Eagle arrived at the coroner's court, the jury was assembled. Witnesses had already filed solemnly in and out of an adjoining room, where they had competently identified the bodies of Flora Sawyer and Nathan Slake.

Many curious spectators were in the room. Every seat was occupied, while a score of farmfolk, friends of Alvin Sawyer, were standing at the rear. Sawyer's nomadic son, Floyd, was absent. He had not been notified of his sister's death, and his present whereabouts were unknown. Alvin Sawyer himself, wretched in his grief, sat directly across the table from Coroner DeQuince and was one of the first witnesses called.

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"You found your daughter's body at what hour, Mr. Sawyer?"

"Maybe two hours after daylight, day afore yesterday," the man said listlessly. His chin was drooped in dejection, while lines of pain winced out across his face.

DeQuince asked, "She met no one during the night that you know of?"

"No, sir."

District Attorney Eagle stood by, watching sharply. Again he caught a faint impression that Sawyer was holding something back. It was evasion rather than guilt, he thought.

"Did you see a pistol beside the body?" DeQuince proceeded.

"No, she just lay there, in the woods, dead." Eagle saw the farmer bite his lip fiercely.

"Did you know Slake, valet to Mr. Seebree?"

"No, sir. I'm a humble man. Them summer people down to the big house went their way and I went mine."

"Your daughter had worked for them as kitchen maid, though, hadn't she?"

"Yes, summertime she worked there. She used to walk the three miles back and forth."

"Did Slake ever walk home with her?"

"If he did, I never heard tell of it."

"Come, Mr. Sawyer." DeQuince glanced sharply over his spectacles. "Do you mean to say you never heard Flora even speak of Slake?"

"That's right. Flora never talked about them city folks she worked for, or any of their help. Floyd did, once in a while. But Floyd, he ain't been home much. Me, I'd always be busy with crops about that time, July and August, which is the only months they keep the house open."

Eagle, hearing this, was quite ready to accept it as truth. For among the spectators at the inquest were Mrs. Wayne Seebree of New York and two of her guests, a Mr. and Mrs. Chardell. Eagle himself had met these three at the door and exchanged a few words with them. And Corrine Seebree had asked Eagle to point out the bereaved father of Flora.

"You do not know him?" Eagle had asked in surprise.

"No. He never came to the house. I knew Flora only as a farm girl who walked a long way to work and who lived with a widower father."

DeQuince resumed his inquiry. "Was your daughter inclined to be despondent?"

"No. You mean did she kill herself? Well, she didn't," Sawyer asserted vigorously. "She had no call to do anything like that. My Flora was a good girl."

"You can suggest no motive for her murder?"

"No, sir. I can't understand it."

DEQUINCE turned deferentially to Eagle. "Any questions?"

"Only one," Eagle said. He produced a memo which read, "N. Y. 77-8853." It seemed to be the license number of an automobile, a number which Eagle had copied from a card found on the kitchen table at Sawyer's farm.

Now he read the number aloud to Sawyer, explaining where he had found it. "Of what car," he asked, "is that the license number?"

Sawyer stared at him, then shook his head slowly. "First time I ever heard of it," he maintained. "If it was writ on a paper at my house, then Flora must've writ it herself. Because I didn't."

"That is all," Eagle said.

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Then an unexpected interruption came from Deputy Sheriff Pryde, who was seated on a sill at the front window.

"Say, Major," Pryde exclaimed, "would you mind reading that number again?" Eagle repeated it.

Pryde, turning, looked through the window toward the street. "Well," he announced, "that number belongs to a New York car, a black roadster. It's parked at the curb right now."

"Goodness! It couldn't be mine, could it?" A modish, slender woman with red hair, who was in the rear row of spectators, arose with some alarm.

"Evidently it is, Mrs. Seebree," Eagle smiled.

He made certain by stepping to Pryde's window. The license number on a roadster out there was "N. Y. 77-8853." It matched with the notation found at Sawyer's farmhouse.

Confronted with the fact, Corrine Seebree appeared to be genuinely puzzled. "I can't imagine why the number on one of our cars should concern Flora Sawyer," she said.

Eagle presumed that she had driven out with the Chardells partly through curiosity, and partly because both Flora Sawyer and Slake had been employed in her household. She had not been expected, and was not scheduled to testify.

But the odd fact of a license number now induced DeQuince to call her as a witness. She came forward without hesitation, a charmingly self-possessed woman, Eagle thought. Also, her high coloring and the tilt of her chin gave him the idea that she might, if aroused or thwarted, be a person of dangerous temper. He knew that she was one of the country's richest women, and that Wayne Seebree was her second husband.

"You know, of course," DeQuince was saying, "that Mr. Seebree's valet was found shot in the back, and dead, in front of your closed summer residence. And that Flora Sawyer was found shot dead the same night, three miles up the road. Now it develops that the number of one of your cars had been jotted down by Flora. Was Flora, when she was your kitchen maid, ever permitted to use that car?"

"Of course not." Corrine Seebree raised her eyebrows.

"Was Slake ever allowed to use it?"

"Not that I know of. Still, Mr. Seebree might have sent him on errands with it."

"Did Slake use it night before last?"

"I hardly think so. The roadster was in the garage at our New York house the next morning. But Slake was missing."

"When did you last see Slake?"

"An hour or so before dinner Monday."

"Did you distrust him?"

"Frankly I did. For a long time I'd been asking my husband to discontinue using him as valet. Monday evening, Mr. Seebree agreed and gave notice."

"What did Slake say?"

"THAT some of his personal things were out at Jersey Elms, and that he would go there for them."

"Were you present when he left?"

"No. I went to the theater with Mr. and Mrs. Chardell. When I got home a little after midnight, Mr. Seebree told me about Slake."

"Did anyone leave your New York house later that night?"

"Of course not." Again the raised eyebrows of the witness added eloquently, "What a silly question!"

"Are you certain, Mrs. Seebree?"

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"Am I certain? Well, naturally I can't vouch for the servants. I know only that when I arrived home with Mr. Chardell, he went directly to his room. I stopped by the study where my husband was working. Mr. Seebree and I sat up talking for hours, until at least three o'clock."

"You say Mr. Chardell went directly to his room. Mrs. Chardell went with him, didn't she?"

"No. Mrs. Chardell didn't come home from the theater with us. A message came to us between acts, saying her aunt was ill in Brooklyn. So Mrs. Chardell took a taxi to Brooklyn and remained with her aunt all night."

"Any further questions, Major?"

Eagle had no question to ask of Mrs. Seebree. But he recalled Alvin Sawyer and inquired, "Where is your son, Floyd?"

To the surprise of the court, Sawyer turned and pointed a finger toward a man in the rear row. "Ask *him*," he said with emphasis.

Gilbert Chardell blinked back at him. Then the man's dark handsome face creased in a patronizing smile. "Why ask *me?*" he countered.

DeQuince called him to the table as a witness. "Do you know Floyd Sawyer, brother of Flora?"

"He worked for me from last August until last January," Chardell said. "But this is May. I haven't seen him for more than four months."

"In what capacity did he work for you, Mr. Chardell?"

"My wife and I were guests at Jersey Elms last summer. We lost our chauffeur, and my wife needed someone to drive her back and forth to New York. A kitchen maid heard her mention it, and told her brother. The brother applied and got the job. I kept him on until early in January. Then he drove me on a business trip to St. Louis, and quit me there. I haven't the faintest idea where he went."

Chardell was excused.

DeQuince then read aloud a deposition taken from Wayne Seebree. It agreed with the verbal testimony just heard from his wife.

A medical witness was called. He told the jury that death in Slake's case had occurred between ten and eleven P.M. Monday, and that death in Flora Sawyer's case had occurred between three and four A.M. Tuesday. It was brought out also that both victims had been shot at point blank range, Flora through the breast, Slake through the back.

A ballistic expert came next. He testified that both bullets had been recovered, and that both had been fired from the same .38 pistol. The gun and the bullets were offered in evidence.

ALL this while District Attorney Eagle was waiting for a witness who had promised to attend, but who had not yet appeared. Eagle, an Indian, was a tracker of crime. He was an adept at tracing footprints in the forest. But sometimes it was equally important, he knew, to trace the steps in the background of a man's life.

What was the background of Slake's? The man once was a ship's steward, Eagle knew. Therefore he was keen to inquire of a skipper who had been in command of Slake's ship.

Just as the court was about to adjourn with the inevitable verdict of deaths by agency unknown, Skipper Wesley Jones arrived.

He was an old man, but vigorous, with a rugged, round face and mutton chop whiskers. Eagle met him at the door and brought him to the coroner's table.

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"Don't see how he can help us, Major," DeQuince said impatiently. "But inquire if you want to. I myself have no questions."

"Mr. Jones," Eagle asked, "when you were in command of the Tonga Belle did you employ a Nathan Slake as steward?"

"Slake? Aye, sir, that I did. Slake signed on with me about twelve year ago, as I recollect."

"Will you step into the next room with a deputy, please, and identify a body?"

A deputy took Jones into the adjoining room. In a few minutes Jones reappeared and seated himself before Eagle.

"That's Slake, all right," he said. "I'd know him anywhere, dead or alive."

"If Slake signed on with you twelve years ago, then he was with you nine years ago at the rescue of Mr. Wayne Seebree."

"That he was."

"Will you describe that rescue briefly, Mr. Jones?"

Wesley Jones described the Skull Island rescue, but not briefly. He was by nature talkative, and this evidently was his pet yarn. He gave many unnecessary details, such as the exact location of the uninhabited New Hebrides islet from which the shipwrecked Seebree had been taken.

He praised the beauties of that isolated bit of reef-bound wilderness, encouraged, no doubt, by the rapt attention of all in the room except Coroner DeQuince.

As the witness was rambling on, DeQuince interrupted testily. "That's all very interesting, but it's getting late. The rescue was all in the newspapers at the time, and fully covered; so let's get on to the murder of Slake."

"Slake continued as your steward for some time after that incident?" Eagle asked.

"Aye. Slake was my steward until three year ago," Jones said. "I myself retired a year after he left me."

"Why did Slake leave your ship three years ago?"

"Because I fired him." Jones said it with an emphatic pound of fist into palm.

"For what offense did you discharge him?"

"We had a coast run at the time," Jones said. "We took cargoes up and down between west Mexico ports and Los Angeles.

"One day I found out that Slake was doin' a bit of private tradin' of his own, on the side."

"You mean petty smuggling?" Eagle prompted.

"The worst kind of it," Jones asserted. "Narcotics. He'd pick the stuff up at some Mexico port, and then peddle it when he went ashore as Los Angeles."

"What particular narcotic did he trade in?"

"Marihuana. You've heard tell of that stuff, haven't you? They smoke it in cigarettes."

"Thank you, Mr. Jones. That's all," Eagle said.

He had, naturally, heard a good deal about marihuana. He knew that it is a deadly, vicious, habit-forming drug. More than that, he was sure now that he knew the important thing about Slake's background. Once a dope peddler, always a dope peddler! Even to the day of his death Wayne Seebree's valet, as a side line, had more than likely been trading in marihuana cigarettes.

Had he corrupted a kitchen maid in the use of it? Was shame, Eagle won-

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dered, sealing the lips of Alvin Sawyer?

CHAPTER IX.

SEEBREE'S DECISION.

"YOU see I was right all the time, Wayne!" Corrine Seebree exclaimed at breakfast the next morning. "And to think we've kept that awful man around the house for three years!"

"A dope peddler! Ugh!" Estelle Chardell's slim shoulders shuddered. Seebree did not see her, for his own flushed face was concealed behind a newspaper which gave a full account of the Kittatinny inquest.

"Next time I want a valet, Wayne," Gilbert Chardell chided, "I'll get you to pick one for me." He winked at Ray Fritchie, the new secretary, who was now installed as a member of the household.

Seebree's senses were in a riot. This narcotic angle took him completely by surprise. It jolted him dizzy. Yet it shouldn't, he realized. The sly Slake certainly had been capable of just such a business. And now Seebree remembered that a few months ago he had found a package of odd-looking cigarettes in a drawer of Slake's effects. At the time it had occurred to him as strange, because Slake himself was not a smoker.

Clearly the fellow had kept touch with some old source of supply, and had continued an illicit traffic in marihuana.

"What did that Indian lawyer mean, Gilbert," Estelle was saying, "when he asked if anyone left this house that night after midnight? Gracious! Surely he doesn't think that one of us drove out to New Jersey and shot that poor girl!"

"He's a deep one, that Indian," Chardell said, with an easy shrug. "Who can tell what goes on in his aboriginal mind?"

"Well, someone *did* murder her, and it wasn't Slake," Seebree said quickly. He was anxious to center attention on the girl's death, of which he was innocent, rather than on Slake.

An opinion came in a wise tone from Ray Fritchie. Fritchie's sloping eyes narrowed as he advanced it. "Slake slipped some dope to that kitchen maid last summer, I'll bet; taught her to use it."

Corrine Seebree was shocked. "Why, that's absurd, Mr. Fritchie! What makes you think it?"

"It fits, doesn't it?" Fritchie argued. "Slake peddled the stuff in a small way, and they were both found dead in the same neighborhood the same night."

"But who shot them?" wondered Estelle Chardell.

"Her old man, of course. My hunch is that Slake had been making deliveries to her and others, using the roadster for transportation. The farmer caught him one time and took the number of his car. The farmer would be boiling mad about it. Bought a gun, I'll bet, and swore he'd get that dope peddler if he ever came around again."

Chardell beamed as though in approval at Fritchie's shrewdness. "Maybe you've hit it, Fritchie. Slake, being fired, went out to Jersey Elms for his things. That would take him right by the girl's house. So he stopped, sold her a batch of marihuana smokes, was caught at it by her old man, who raised one helluva row. He followed Slake and shot him, then returned home to take the dope away from his daughter."

"She ran into the woods with it," Fritchie guessed. "Her father caught

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up with her, still with the gun in his hand. In a wild quarrel he shot her, then heaved the gun as far as he could throw it. In remorse he reported it as a mystery murder."

"It does explain everything," Corrine admitted. "Even the license number."

"Dovetails perfectly," Seebree murmured. Again he evaded inspection by ducking behind his newspaper.

"Oh, I don't think so at all!" the blond Estelle objected. Seebree looked up with a start, for Estelle Chardell seldom advanced a contrary opinion. "I took particular notice of poor Mr. Sawyer at the inquest," she said, "and I'm sure he's completely crushed. The girl was all he had in the world, except a son who's never at home; he loved her, so I can't believe he shot her."

THE front doorbell rang, and again Seebree started nervously. Every ringing bell for two days had sent a chill down his spine. Each time he braced himself for the shock of Gerald Howden. Howden was alive and in New York. Any approach might be Howden's. Any instant the man might and should appear to claim his wife and estate, and to denounce Seebree.

This time it was only a telegram.

"Come, Fritchie," Seebree said. "Let's be getting downtown. Lots of work today."

Somehow Seebree felt safer downtown, where he was on the top floor of a skyscraper, than here at home. The reason for that was Corrine. When Gerald Howden did announce himself, as surely he would some time, Seebree wanted to be anywhere rather than in the presence of Corrine.

Corrine, though usually a model of composure, could be fire and brimstone. Her rage would be devastating, Seebree knew, when she learned of the Skull Island treachery; and realized that she had made it worse by giving her own hand and fortune to the traitor.

His only defense, Seebree thought, would be to say that he had been mistaken, and was sorry. He could say that he didn't know Howden had survived the wreck; that he had not seen Howden on the island. Howden would of course deny that. Howden would say, and truthfully, that he had lived seven months there with Seebree; that Seebree had promised to call him if a rescue boat hove in sight.

The world and Corrine would believe Howden. The world and Corrine would denounce Seebree. Yet Seebree, more desperate every minute, could think of no better defense.

Corrine went to the door with him, kissed him good-bye for the day.

Seebree proceeded on with Fritchie to the limousine in the driveway. Fritchie carried a briefcase of correspondence, brought home last evening to make the business of night work look convincing. As he preceded Seebree to the car, Seebree could see a faint flat shape at Fritchie's well tailored hip. A gun, he knew. And Ray Fritchie had a name for knowing how to use it.

"How'm I doing?" Fritchie grinned. "Did I pass inspection as a secretary?"

"Perfectly," Seebree answered without warmth.

They embarked in the car. Seebree instructed the chauffeur to drive to the Howden Building. Then he saw Howden.

Howden stood like a statue on the opposite walk. Gaunt, bearded, loosely clothed, he was staring across the street at Seebree's house.

Or rather at his own, Howden's,

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house. Again the challenge of him brought a pallid panic to Seebree. Would the man go in? Would he confront Corrine? By now the limousine had left the drive and was rolling down the street. Seebree looked back. To his relief he saw Howden turn and walk slowly away.

Silently Seebree cursed him. He cursed himself, his own odious luck, and the utterly hopeless prospect ahead. Why was Howden waiting? Why didn't the man come forward with a claim?

"He's playing with me!" Seebree thought. "He's half mad, after years on that damned island. Now he's out to drive *me* mad."

SEEBREE sat very still and said nothing. His head was still turned as he stared through the car's rear window.

At the Howden Building he ascended with Fritchie to the top floor. "Be ready to go out for lunch with me, Fritchie," he said, and sought the refuge of his private office.

But even there he felt hunted. Even there he was pursued by the menace of Howden. And even by the menace of Slake, though Slake was dead. With Howden showing up like this, what an infernally ill-considered time he had picked to efface Slake! Now he had that Indian Eagle delving into the whole of it.

Eagle, according to Corrine's report, had asked some extremely pointed questions of Skipper Jones. And Jones had rehashed the entire business of Skull Island. Did it mean anything? Could Eagle remotely suspect Slake's campaign of blackmail?

Seebree paced his office. He was alone there, yet never had he felt so starkly exposed. The great city hummed around and beneath him. The pressure of its life crushed cruelly about him. His urge now was to be far hidden from all human eyes. Headlines, he thought, would soon be shrieking the story of Howden. The tabloids would make maudlin capital of Howden, child of fortune, yet a derelict castaway for nine cruel years through the perfidy of Wayne Seebree. Already Seebree could feel the shock of exposure, and more and more it terrified his soul. Desperately he wanted to escape it. To shrink out of sight. Even that faraway island of the seas, where he had deserted Howden, appealed to him now like a haven.

A buzzer buzzed. The girl outside told him that a Mr. Chardell was calling.

"Show him in," Seebree said with a grimace. He knew what Chardell wanted, confound the man anyway! But he was in a mood to welcome any diversion from his own hellish reflections.

Chardell came in like a brisk breeze. "Say, Wayne, you're not going to let me lose out on that option, are you? It's a darb. I can cut you in on it, if you like, or you can make it a straight loan."

"How much?" Seebree asked dully. His mind was far away.

"The property's priced at two hundred fifty thousand, and it's a steal at that figure. All I need right now is twenty thousand for a binder."

Chardell's lean face was glowing. He came close and laid a hand caressingly on Seebree's shoulder. Any other time Seebree would have brushed him away. But conscience, just now, made him a coward. He was too mired in his own despair to rebuke Chardell.

Chardell purred sleekly on, like a handsome, seductive Satan. To all

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women and most men he would have been convincing, but not to Seebree.

Seebree barely heard him. In the end he answered with a shrug, "Well, Gil, I've been too busy to look the property up. Give me time."

Then he added, to change the subject, "How does Fritchie's idea about those murders strike you?"

"You mean the idea that the farmer killed them both?"

"That's the slant, I believe. Reasonable, isn't it?"

"No," Chardell said slowly. There was a sulk of disappointment on his lips as he tamped a cigarette. "After mulling it over I agree with Estelle. You see, Wayne, we have the advantage of you. We were at the inquest and saw Sawyer. An honest farmer and devoted father, if ever I saw one. All cut up about losing the girl. He could have shot Slake if Slake was peddling her dope, but he couldn't have brought himself to the point of shooting the girl."

"Well, maybe you're right," sighed Seebree. "And now, Gil, I'm awfully busy, please."

HE managed to get rid of Chardell, then resumed the pacing of his office. Not one letter did he peruse or dictate all morning.

At noon, Ray Fritchie came sauntering in. "Ready to go to lunch, Seebree?"

Although desperately afraid he would encounter Howden in the corridor below, Seebree nevertheless assented. He couldn't stay forever trapped in his office. It was a gantlet he had to run. What was the use of having a body-guard if he didn't use him?

He kept close to Fritchie's elbow as they stepped out of the elevator. His eyes searched all corners of the foyer, but failed to see Howden. Howden, for once, wasn't stalking him.

Wearily relieved, Seebree passed out to the street with Fritchie.

"You lunch at your club, don't you, Seebree? Shall I call a taxi?"

Seebree was about to say yes when he remembered that day before yesterday Howden had taken a post opposite the club. Maybe Howden was there now, waiting for him.

"Not today," Seebree said. "Haven't the time to spare. Any lunch counter will do."

They walked up Sixth Avenue. In the next block Seebree said, "Let's take a chance here," and turned into a second rate lunch room.

Stools were aligned along what had once been a bar.

Seebree, mounting a stool, ordered a sandwich and coffee. Fritchie took the seat beside him.

"Funny joint for a tycoon like you to be eating in," he grinned.

"I'm not choosy," Seebree said.

"You know, Seebree, I been thinking over those Jersey killings. And I see a hole in that brainstorm I had at breakfast."

"About Sawyer being guilty on both counts?"

"Yes."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It doesn't account for Slake's transportation. Unless he walked six miles after taking a train to Kittatinny, he drove out there in a car. If Sawyer shot him as I thought, then the car would have been found near the crime."

"So what?"

"So it means someone drove Slake out there. Maybe he took a taxi, either from here or from the county seat. Or maybe some partner in his dope racket drove him out there. Whoever it was

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could have shot him and then driven away."

"But that," Seebree objected, "leaves the girl out of it."

Fritchie lowered an eyelid. "Not if she happened to witness Slake's murder. She'd hike away to report; and the killer would be hot after her with the same gun. Think it over, Seebree. It fits like a glove."

"You ought to be a detective," Seebree said grimly.

Fritchie sat on his right. And now Seebree became aware that another customer was climbing the stool at his left. The man's elbow touched his own. Seebree paid no attention to that. Then, with a start, he saw a reflection in the backbar mirror.

HOWDEN! Here at this counter, Gerry Howden was sitting elbow to elbow with him. Seebree nearly toppled from his stool. Howden did not accost him. Howden did not even turn his head. Howden stared straight into the backbar glass—and there his eyes met Seebree's.

Seebree reeled dizzily. Faintness all but dropped him to the floor. The blood drained from his head. His heart raced like a motor.

"Come," he said hoarsely to Ray Fritchie. "I got to get back to the office." Already he was making for the door.

"I'm stuck for the lunch, am I?" Fritchie called after him aggrievedly.

He paid the bill and caught up with his employer outside. "You look sick as a cat," he said.

"The air in that dive made me dizzy," Seebree said, and hurried on toward the Howden Building. He didn't draw a full breath until he was locked in his private office.

All afternoon he hid himself there, like a hunted animal.

At half past five as he went in the elevator with Fritchie, again he hugged close to his guard's elbow. Again he expected to see Howden stalking him in the foyer.

Again, to his relief, Howden was not there.

But two hours later he saw Howden. It was just after dark; Seebree was dining at home with Corrine, the Chardells and Fritchie. Chardell was urging the merits of his option deal to Corrine. Estelle's small blond head was inclined toward Fritchie, as she discussed sympathetically the bereavement of Alvin Sawyer. Seebree, chin down, was deep in his own dejection.

Then Seebree looked up and saw Howden's face. It was pressed against a window pane. The hollow, wistful eyes of the man stared in upon the comforts of his own house. The sight of that white, gaunt face, against the blackness of night, brought a spasm of terror to Seebree. Cold sweat drenched him. He swayed in his seat, half fainting.

"What is it, Wayne?" cried Corrine. She caught his arm.

"He had one of those spells at lunch," Fritchie said.

In a moment Seebree was steady again. His brain cleared. And now he came definitely to a decision.

He must beat exposure by taking speedy flight. When Howden did present himself frankly to them all, he, Seebree, must be forever beyond sight.

He must go, but not empty-handed. He must strip the bank accounts which were in his own name and Corrine's, and sell bonds at any price. Then he could fade from the picture, leaving the field to Gerald Howden.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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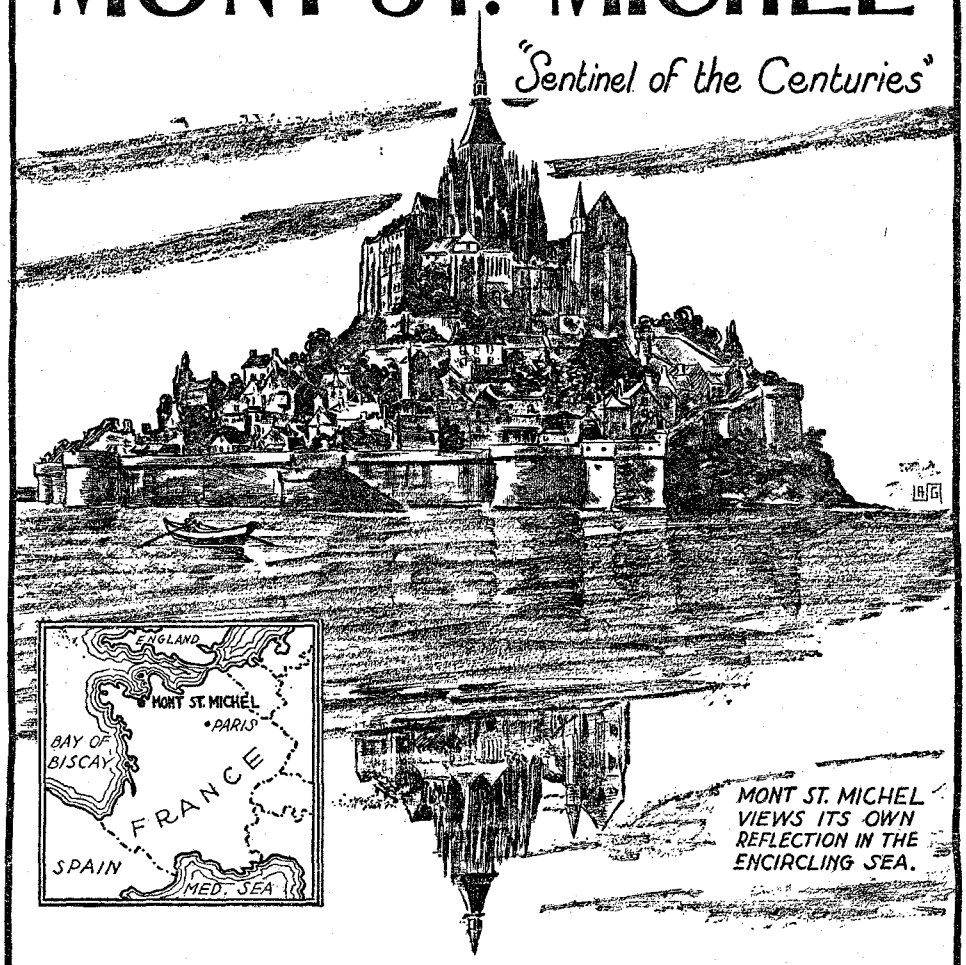
MONT ST. MICHEL

"Sentinel of the Centuries"



MONT ST. MICHEL VIEWS ITS OWN REFLECTION IN THE ENCIRCLING SEA.

ACCORDING to an old Celtic myth, Mont St. Michel was a sea tomb to which the souls of the dead were ferried in an invisible bark. A later tradition claims that in the year 708 A.D., when Saint Michael, the saint of high places, appeared in a vision to the Bishop of Avranches, he commanded a chapel to be built upon this granite islet which rises 260 feet above the sea off the coast of Normandy. And so it became a shrine to which pilgrims came to worship, just as to-day tourists come from afar to view this ancient rock city, which has played such a gallant part in French history as fortress, prison and abbey.

A mile-long causeway now joins the island to the mainland, and at low tide its granite cone is surrounded by sand flats. Around the base is a circlet of medieval walls and towers, while along its single winding street straggle quaint old houses, rising tier on tier as though plastered against the rock. Crowning the isle is an ancient abbey with huge buttresses and bastions flanking a central bell tower and spire.

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Sergeant Webb of the Shanghai police finds that Oriental tricks help in tracking an Oriental murderer

Lee fell to his knees, pleaded and begged

"Face"

By ALFRED BATSON

"I GOT there within fifteen minutes of the killings, and I talked with fifty people who were in the alley." Junior Sergeant Willard Webb was making his report to John Dixon, gray-eyed Assistant Police Commissioner in charge of detectives on the Shanghai force. "They were typical coolie factory workers, too excited to remember what they'd seen, if they'd seen anything. Apparently somebody shot down the cashier as he stepped from the auto with the payroll; somebody else slit open the bag of small change and strewed it over the ground. During the mêlée the cashier's assistant was downed. Then, while the coolies were fighting for the silver the gang snatched the paper money, and beat it." He broke off abruptly. "Chief, it was a perfect job—so far."

Dixon pursed his lips, interrupted. "They were Chekiang Bank notes. Here's a list of the numbers. What you're telling me is your idea?"

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Webb nodded.

" Go on." Dixon leaned back and studied Webb's earnest face, the blue, flintlike eyes, the well-shaped jaw. He liked the kid, liked him more than any other American recruit. Webb wasn't outwardly spectacular—but he got results. That was what sent men ahead in Shanghai. Webb was that kind—the kind Mary deserved.

" I got a feeling this gang, or the brains of it, came from outside Shanghai," continued Webb earnestly. " It looks to me like the work of somebody who got his training in the States. He hates the natives, though he's one himself. Feels he's smarter than a Shanghai Chinese, more "—he fumbled—" well, more sophisticated."

Dixon sat up. " Why?"

A hand went to Webb's pocket. " I got a hunch . . ." He drew out a wallet and from it extracted three empty whitish paper tubes which he placed on the desk. " Look!"

" What about them?" asked Dixon.

" They're expensive Miss America cigarettes—"

" Which proves nothing. A coolie might have stolen them."

" Right. But notice the third one. No coolie would throw away a foreign cigarette half smoked. They like them too well; gives them ' face.' Most coolies smoke The Rat or Hatamans. This fellow had three Miss Americas."

Dixon's fingers drummed on the desk. " They're pretty well trampled."

" The alley was crammed with people, all natives. I couldn't find anyone who'd seen a foreigner there in weeks."

" Hmmm." Dixon knew that finding the man who had smoked those cigarettes would be like finding a man who liked shark fin soup. Any Chinese who could get his hands on them would smoke them. " It's a slim chance, son," he said. " Now what . . . ?"

" I know the Chinese, Chief," said Webb tersely, " and no matter how savvy the gang was, they're bound to be so smart they overstep."

Dixon smiled with a cheerfulness he didn't feel. " In a day or two when the smoke dies down somebody'll begin spending that stuff, and we'll nab him," he said. " That's what twenty years on the force has taught me. By the way, how is this exchange plan of yours coming along?"

" Fine," said Webb, brightening. " I sent some fingerprints and photographs to Washington a month ago. A new batch came in from there on the last boat. I haven't had time to go through them yet."

Dixon grunted as his future son-in-law stood up. " By the bye," he added casually. " The Merchants Guild phoned and offered five thousand taels reward. I'd like to see you earn it."

Webb's face broke into a grin. " I'd sure like to. Mary and I could use the money."

" When are you going to get married?"

Webb laughed apologetically.

" Well, I've only got about five hundred saved up," he said, " and though Mary's willing, I—"

Dixon grinned—he appreciated Webb's level head. Some men would have jumped at the chance to marry the boss's daughter, money or no money.

" When does your leave start?" he asked.

" This week-end."

" Going out of the city?"

" I was," Webb said slowly. " But—"

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"Son," Dixon broke in, "this police force will be running long after you and I are dead and buried. Go over to Japan and play some golf, or go down to Hongkong."

Webb waited for him to finish, then started for the door. He knew he'd remain in Shanghai to look for a Chinese who smoked Miss America cigarettes. Mary and he could use five thousand taels.

DURING the first day of his leave Webb found nine Occidental tobacconists who handled Miss Americas; compiled a list of thirty-one purchasers. After five days spent in questioning them he began to fear the futility of approach from that angle. They admitted they left the cigarettes around their homes, in their offices; that servants might have appropriated them as a form of minor *cumsha*, or petty graft.

Headquarters reported that nothing had turned up in the tea houses, cabarets, or at the race tracks. The second week he canvassed the native tobacconists and, after talking with ninety-four, found not one who carried the expensive, imported brand. Then his leave came to an end.

The first day back in the office a chit from the Commissioner demanded what progress had been made. The note suggested adroitly that if Webb could not produce...

Dixon didn't help to calm his fears. "I'll try to give you more time on it, son, but I can't promise." He shook his head futilely. "The Commissioner is an Englishman. You're an American...."

Mary Dixon made Webb take her to the Palace Hotel to dinner that night. "You don't look well," she said. "You should have taken father's advice and gone away—not spend your entire leave working on that case."

"We could use five thousand taels," Webb replied stubbornly.

During a lull in the dancing he suddenly tensed and called Mary's attention to a foreign-dressed Chinese who sat a few tables away, dining alone and in state. His dinner had consisted of roast chicken Maryland style, Southern baked yams, fritters, and apple pie *à la mode*.

"He's no Shanghai native," Mary said, slowly.

"He interests me," said Webb. Then he added, with a laugh, "He's probably a restaurant king from New York searching for chop suey in China."

"Well, I've never found any over here."

Webb watched the Chinese's narrow, shifting eyes. The man wore an air of composure and yet he was uncomfortable to a trained observer, for fear he would be taken for a native-born, native-raised Oriental. He had ordered his dinner in a loud voice; he had addressed the "boy" who waited on him as "coolie," and thereby violated the rigid caste system.

When the cigarette tray was brought he had spurned the native products with a sneer and had taken a gold-banded Corona-Corona. Then he sat back and smiled on all who watched him.

When he signed the chit, instead of the usual ten per cent tip he casually tossed two silver Mex on the table.

"His dinner didn't cost much more than that," Mary said.

"No, but he's afraid the 'boys' will take him for a Shanghai-lander. So he gives himself 'face.'"

"I thought foreign-raised Chinese try to get away from 'face.'"

"They like to think they've left it

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behind," Webb said. " But underneath they'll always be Chinese. They can't resist the opportunity to show off before foreigners."

THE Customs clock was chiming twelve when Mary suggested they leave. On going out the Nanking Road door, Webb paused and filled his lungs with the night air. The Bund was empty and quiet. An occasional light blinked from a ship anchored in the river, the Pootung side was a dark blur, a Sikh policeman strolled by, rifle on shoulder, and saluted. There was a grating, whirring noise under the sidewalk.

The hatches to the cellar opened and an elevator appeared with several barrels of refuse.

Something on one of the barrels caught Webb's attention, held him in a vise.

He stepped closer and his breath caught!

He was looking down at a discarded carton that had once held a dozen packages of Miss America cigarettes. His mind functioned in a split second. He went back in the lounge and talked with the night manager. But his heart sank with the speed of a ricksha coolie running for a fare.

The hotel did not carry Miss Americas, had never sold any.

" We wouldn't be able to tell if a guest brought them in, in his baggage," the manager said.

Webb thanked him.

As he returned to Mary he failed to notice ebony, slitted eyes watching him from behind the elevator grille at the turn in the stairs. They had witnessed only the end of the conversation, but the steel-trap brain behind them had noticed that the tall American with his pretty girl was a person of some consequence—perhaps a plain-clothes man.

THE following morning he could not erase the carton cover from his mind. It seared like a hot flame. He went back to the Palace and saw M. Theriot, the day manager, who told him the hotel had one hundred and ninety-two guests.

Webb studied the list. He discarded all foreigners and concentrated on five Chinese names. Theriot identified the owners.

Chu Ching-lan was an ex-beet-root grower in the States, and was going home to Canton to die. He was so old he walked with a cane. Yeh Peh-chih and Hsueh On-fah were missionaries on leave; King Kyi-tz was a well-known local banker; and Nien Siao-ho was a professor at Gin Ling College. All above suspicion. Webb saw his hopes go glimmering.

He was so downcast he sat in the lobby and ordered a whisky and soda. Suddenly his attention was distracted by the foreign-dressed Chinese he had seen the night before.

The Chinese was at the desk asking for his bill. He was too well dressed to be a college professor, he was not King the banker, he certainly was not old or a missionary.

Webb sat up, strained his ears.

The bill was passed over and the Chinese brought a thick roll of bank notes from his pocket, and paid. Then he went to the cigar counter, asked for a Corona-Corona, and beamed genially when the American girl thanked him for his generous tip. It was obvious that he was a Chinese apart, by the lordly way he handled the servants, by his up-to-the-minute American clothes, and by his amused smile at the native *taipans*. His smile was contemptuous.

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When he went into the bar Webb approached the desk and asked Theriot for his name.

"Ah, that one!" The Frenchman was voluble. "We do not consider him a native. He is George K. Lee."

"I savvy," Webb grunted. "The name in Chinese is Li, but he has Americanized it to L-e-e. What does he do?"

Theriot shrugged. "If I asked my guests what they did I'd have no business. He pays his account. That's my worry."

Suddenly a thought struck Webb. He had to see the bills, but he did not want to arouse Theriot's suspicions. Taking his pay check from his pocket, he asked the hotel manager to cash it.

Theriot opened his cash drawer as Webb bent over his shoulder. The transaction took several minutes and ended with the Frenchman on the verge of apoplexy. Webb had protested that some bills were too dirty, some too large, others of doubtful banks. And not one had been from the Chekiang Bank!

But Webb was not yet done with George K. Lee. The Americanized Chinese was a little too smart, too sure of himself.

Webb was so absorbed that he failed to notice Lee return to the lounge from the bar, take in the scene at the desk, and hastily sit in a dim corner with a copy of the Shanghai *Times* before his face.

If he was perturbed, he failed to show it in his bland, unconcerned absorption in the news.

THE Palace dining room was crowded, as Webb had planned it would be, when he halted in the doorway at twenty minutes to one. The French head waiter frowned with exasperation. There was but one vacant seat.

"I'll take it," Webb volunteered.

"Impossible—it's with a Chinese."

"*Maskee,*" Webb said.

There was a sigh, a hesitation. Finally the Frenchman led him to a chair opposite George K. Lee. The Chinese's eyes glinted. The American was a plainclothes dick, as he had suspected, probably on a routine check-up. Lee knew Shanghai foreigners too well to imagine they'd sit with a Chinese without good reason. He would twit the American, watch him squirm in the tangled trail that was dead before it was come upon. Let the American go ahead. He'd find nothing, because there was nothing to find—or if there was, Lee would be too smart to speak out of turn. He'd pulled the perfect job and covered his tracks as no Shanghai Chinese could have done.

"You don't mind...?" Webb said.

"Not me. Come on. Squat." The Chinese grinned sardonically. "Usually you Britishers—"

"I'm an American," Webb said.

Lee's face was a study of pleased innocence.

"Hell's bells! All the better; so am I." He picked up the menu, passed it across. "Let me tip you off to the baked Alaska salmon. It came over iced on a boat two days ago. I can't stand the food these Chinks put out. In fact," he added, "I can't stand the Chinks much at all."

Webb smiled, ordered baked Alaska salmon.

They talked about baseball, the weather, and the pleasurable anticipation of one day sitting down to an American cooked meal. After a time Webb casually brought the conversation around to where he wanted it.

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"...From Frisco a couple of weeks ago," Lee explained genially. "I'm looking over the land the old folks had sense enough to leave." Suddenly he bent forward, showed his white teeth in a broad grin. This was going to be funny. "I got in just ahead of the murder and robbery that's filling the papers. The police don't seem to do much about it."

"No," Webb admitted. "But usually they wind up winners. They'll nab the gang."

"Nab 'em?" Lee's head shook deprecatingly. "Without evidence or a witness?" He laughed.

"There's that side to it," Webb admitted ruefully.

Lee strained forward, his voice dropped. "If I were a cop I'd put myself in the gang's place, try to solve it from that angle."

"You've read about it," Webb said. "What would you do?"

Lee roared. It took him several moments to quiet. The American was a bigger sap than he'd expected. "The first thing I'd do if I were a crook, and this were Frisco," he beamed, "would be to hire the slickest lawyer in the Golden Gate, Manny Heppleheimer."

WEBB'S breath caught. He knew of Heppleheimer's reputation, and he was encouraged at the thought that the Chinese had brought in his name. It showed Lee was in touch with the people who could most aid him—if, as he said, he were a crook. Webb listened eagerly.

"Manny could argue the devil into heaven," Lee was saying. "Then, after I got him, I'd commit the crime and depend on him to get me out. And he'd do it." He stirred his demi-tasse, looked up wide-eyed. "But I don't know what I'd do here."

Webb tried to appear nonchalant.

"The police don't seem to be getting anywhere, that's true." Casually he brought the package of Miss America cigarettes, opened them. "Smoke?"

The Chinese's face retained its inscrutable, bland calmness. "Thanks, I don't smoke cigarettes. I like cigars. Let me get you a Corona—"

He turned, looked for the "boy."

Of course, that's how he'd done it, dropping those cigarette stubs in the alley. Then the American had seen the carton cover Lee had thrown out, and put two and two together. He was smart, this detective. *But he wasn't smart enough.*

Webb smoked a half dozen cigarettes and then after a desultory half hour found an excuse to leave. Lee seemed pained at his going.

He asked earnestly, "Do you eat here every day?"

"Couple of times a week," Webb lied, knowing too well his slim pocketbook couldn't stand the pace.

"Good. Any time you see me, come over. I like to talk to Americans—bright ones."

Webb got up, grasped Lee's outstretched hand, and felt the rippling muscles.

He nodded, left.

It wasn't until he was back at headquarters that he permitted a latent smile to creep over his face. Despite the Chinese's guileless look, despite his refusal to smoke a Miss America, he had made one error. He had not inquired what was Webb's business.

That was displaying more taciturnity than Webb had ever before met in a tourist. It was the first question they always asked. Webb's mind went farther.

The Chinese hadn't asked, because

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he knew. And it was because he knew, because he'd had a hand in the murders, that he could not restrain himself from talking of the crime. He was like a native executioner taunting his victims before swinging the broad-ax. It was hereditary; no amount of foreign upbringing could eradicate it. Regardless of his foreign clothes, his loud dislike of the Chinese, Webb knew George K. Lee at heart was fundamentally an Oriental whether he realized it or not.

"THEY'RE kicking again about the murders and robbery," Dixon said that night to Webb. "How are you getting on with it?"

Webb described his vain hunt for a smoker of Miss America cigarettes, not mentioning George K. Lee.

Dixon shook his head, grunted.

"Just as I warned you, you're wasting time on that angle, son," he said.

Webb made no reply. The hastily arrived at theory had struck him like a thunderbolt. But he dared not make a move until he was reasonably sure of success.

Since it involved Mary and his carefully hoarded five hundred dollars, he had to be doubly careful. To try it and fail would be catastrophic.

Suddenly Dixon cut in on his thoughts. "Since you've been working this case," he said, "you haven't been in the office much. So today I took the liberty of looking over your desk." He coughed, was reluctant to go on.

"That's all right," Webb said. "Anything in there is police business."

Dixon opened a drawer in the desk and reached for a large envelope from the United States Department of Justice, and brought out a dozen gloss-coated papers.

He looked at one, shook his head, passed it to Webb, glanced at another, a third, several.

Suddenly he spoke up. "Now, here's a Chinese, this is in our line."

Webb's breath clogged, the blood pounded into his temples as he stared at the bland, open face above the notification—"Wanted on suspicion of robbing the U. S. mail." He could read no further, for Dixon was speaking.

He heard, "...Five thousand dollars...What's the name?" Dixon interrupted himself, bending to look over Webb's shoulder. "George K. L-e-e or L-i....Ever see him?"

Webb's voice stuck in his throat. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"I had lunch with him," he found strength to reply.

Dixon shot a glance at him, hesitated a brief second. Then he unlocked a drawer in the desk, took out his service revolver.

He spoke concisely. "What's the story, lad?"

Webb laid his cards on the table, told everything that had happened. "He's sly," he concluded. "He's the shrewdest crook I've ever seen."

"The more reason we should nab him quick," Dixon cut him off. He pocketed the revolver, reached for his hat. "Come on, before he can jump. Here's where you collect the five thousand...." He laughed exultantly. "That's about a year and a half's salary for you, youngster, roughly sixteen thousand Mex."

Instead of rising, Webb put a hand on Dixon's arm. "Not yet, boss. I've got a hunch. Sit down."

"What? Here's the money waiting for you."

Webb was adamant. "Give me a couple of minutes."

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Dixon let out a sigh of wonder. He sank into a chair.

Webb bent forward, his face strained. " Lee got off something during lunch that makes me hesitate to grab him. He said he knew a lawyer in San Francisco, Manny Heppleheimer, whom he'd retain if he were in trouble.

" If we pick Lee up and send him back, he'll probably retain Heppleheimer, a smart lawyer, and get out. I know you Britishers poke a lot of fun at our courts, and sometimes you're right. I'm convinced from the way Lee kidded me about the Shanghai police that he pulled the two murders and the robbery. If I can pin them on him here, I've got him—because there is no Heppleheimer in Shanghai." He laughed. " So my idea is to nail him first on the two local charges and, if he gets free on them, we'll hold him for Frisco."

DIXON waved his hands. " Son, let me tell you something. You can't touch him on these Shanghai jobs unless you get some direct evidence. And the only evidence is the money. From what you say, he's too damned smart to show his hand. Furthermore "—he shook a finger—" if you let him get away it will cost you your job."

He sat back, wiped his forehead with his sleeve. " He's probably got the hot stuff hidden and enough safe money in his pockets to carry him along and wait us out. He sounds like a savvy American."

" On the surface, yes," Webb cut in. " Underneath he's still an Oriental. If I know anything about Chinese psychology, I'll make him."

" Bah," Dixon interrupted. " You'll make him what?"

" Take me to that hot money."

" You're crazy," Dixon growled. " How are you going to do it?"

Webb raised a finger. The gray-thatched head bent forward, an ear beside Webb's mouth. As the younger man whispered, a smile broke slowly over the weathered face.

" I'm sure of it," Webb concluded.

" Son, I wish you hadn't told me. I'd rather not know anything about it. But if you want to go ahead and take a chance on yourself and Mary—damned if I'll not back you up."

He placed his pistol back in the drawer and, going to a cabinet, took out a bottle. He filled two glasses and passed one over. Then he looked at Webb, shook his head. " You're crazy as hell. I guess I am, too, to let you try it. But here's luck."

WEBB picked Lee up in the Palace lobby the following evening and led him to the bar. On the third drink Lee began to smile craftily. " This fool thinks he can get me drunk and I'll spill something," he said to himself. " He's only kidding himself. I can drink him down any time, and I don't talk when I'm drunk."

Webb paid for the dozen drinks as they left. His grimace at biting into the hundred dollars he'd drawn from his meager savings went unnoticed. Lee smiled inscrutably. He was happier, more amusing than Webb had seen him before.

From the Palace they made a round of the Chinese cabarets, the Black Cat, the Rat Mort, the Blue Bird, and wound up at 5 A.M. drinking champagne with Miss Butterfly, the sensational dancer at the Good Times.

Webb left the smiling and slightly sarcastic Lee on Nanking Road, went to the headquarters bar, where he

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counted his money. He had twenty-eight odd dollars left. Lee hadn't spent a cent.

The following evening Webb insisted on a dinner of bear paws at an exclusive native restaurant on Boone Road. Later they went to the Chinese dog track, where after indifferent successes he ended minus fifty-two dollars of his second hundred.

He was worried when he got to the office. The preliminaries of his hunch were working all right, but at the present rate he'd be broke sooner than he expected. Then the hunch would die by its own hand.

"Those Chink places are all right—for Chinks," Lee growled, as they were getting up after lunch the following noon. "Let's try something with more class."

He insisted on footing the bill and on giving the waiter three dollars. The crowd looked on, and Lee gloated over the attention he attracted.

"All right," Webb said. "We'll begin on the places foreigners go."

"That's the idea," Lee exulted. "To hell with Chinks."

THAT night Webb set a pace that included the Tavern, Ladow's, The Carleton, The Little Club, and Club Shanghai. Following Webb's lead, Lee also ran amuck. He reveled in tips out of all proportion to the waiters, champagne to the orchestras, and when the Little Club star, Rosita, sat at their table, he ordered 1820 port for the house. Spending, squandering, showing off, he had the time of his life, laughed at Webb's offer to split the bills.

When the evening was finished Webb's tabulation read one hundred and eighty-six dollars for Lee; four dollars and sixty cents for himself.

Saturday they began at the Astor House tea dance, continued to the Cathay for dinner, dropped in at the jai-alai game, and wound up at the Canidrome, where Lee's choices of whippets either chased each other or fell down—they never chased the rabbit.

Lee—two hundred and thirty-nine dollars fifty. Webb—five dollars twenty.

But the Chinese was having a wonderful time; he never stopped saying so. With Webb, the clean-cut American, as his front, he could go anywhere. He was a big shot!

A svelte Russian in Ladow's sobbed a story of her family starving under the Bolsheviki heel, and Lee came through with a hundred, taking pains that everyone saw the gesture. They stopped at another establishment where eyebrows were lifted as Lee entered, but as quickly descended when Webb followed.

Here a girl from Kansas City cried on Lee's shoulder, wished all Chinese were like him for look, generosity, and snappy American clothes. She whined a story of consumptive brothers in California. Lee responded with one hundred and fifty.

It was Sunday afternoon that Webb reported the growing success of his scheme to Dixon.

"How much of your money have you thrown away?" Dixon grunted.

"I've only got about a hundred left," Webb admitted.

"Better not tell Mary. She's been hearing things about you. The Commissioner says you're crazy, but it's your money and if you want to burn it up to let you."

That evening Webb pleaded a headache when Mary suggested he stay for dinner. He was afraid of having to

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talk afterward, and he wanted sleep. But before leaving he had inveigled Dixon into getting him a pass for the Country Club golf links.

" The board of governors will throw me out if I send you there with a Chinese," Dixon grunted. " You know us Shanghai British...." He fussed, fumed. But he wrote out the pass.

Monday morning when Webb broached the invitation, Lee pounded his back, the ebony, beady eyes glinting in a smile.

" You're showing me the swellest fun of my life. Will I meet any foreign big shots?"

" Every one in the city will be there," Webb replied. " There's a match on."

" I'll never forget you." Suddenly the humor of it struck him. He laughed uproariously. No, indeed, he'd never forget this dumb young American detective!

Lee insisted on the best foreign tailor in Shanghai. In addition to the golf outfit, he went down the line for a tuxedo and three sack suits.

" I hate the Chink word ' face,' " he grinned, " but that's what clothes give you. I'll bet the Chinks who see me with you in places they never can get into will hate me."

Webb smiled. " Forget it, you're different. I hardly think of you as a Chinese."

BY the end of the week Lee had become a legend in the flesh. Bartenders at three cabarets named drinks for him. A dog at the Canidrome became " American Kid." He was on the verge of buying Lightning, the record-holding whippet, when something almost imperceptible happened.

His good spirits vanished. He became morose, though his mouth smiled. When Webb suggested the theater he protested he needed sleep. Cabaret charmers telephoned him and were brusquely put off. Webb caught the signs and, as he exulted silently, he increased his vigilance. The crisis was coming.

Lee was never out of his sight, save when sleeping. Even then, a Chinese detective was the " hall boy " on his floor. Another took up a ricksha post outside the hotel door. Dixon held a dozen trusted operatives at Webb's call.

Webb was waiting for the break when Lee sprang a surprise. When Webb called to have lunch with him one day he found the Chinese accompanied by two vicious-looking natives. Lee grinned as he made the introductions. The natives' eyes ranged calculatingly over Webb as they acknowledged his salutation. They were well-built men, rangy and muscled, typical *ronins*. One had a livid scar running down the side of his chin.

Lee explained distastefully that they were his cousins, Gnau and Ki. They had been left behind when his family had gone to the States. They lived in Soochow and had come to Shanghai for the day. Therefore he had been obliged to hire an automobile to show them around. He invited Webb to go along and point out places of interest. Webb said he would be glad to, after tiffin.

That fitted perfectly into Lee's plans. The later in the day, the better. He repeated his appreciation that Webb would come on the trip.

The others stood a little back, their close-set gimlet eyes never off the American. Their mouths were hard. They never smiled. They spoke only pidgin English, and their clothes were

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the familiar long-gowns of the Chinese.

As Webb left the Palace shortly after one, pleading an excuse to catch a wink of sleep and return, Lee watched him go and then settled his cousins in the bar and left, almost on the American's heels. He hastened along Nanking Road, then turned into the Bund, still grinning. He had a surprise for his pal Webb—the cop. He was too excited to notice a ricksha trailing indifferently in his wake.

After a cautious look around he went into the Blue Funnel office and bought a ticket for Singapore on the Ranpura. She was sailing that night. The name he gave was Chung Bo-fa. He said he would have no baggage.

Within five minutes of his leaving, the ricksha coolie was telephoning Dixon a report. He had learned the details via a clerk and two Mex cash.

Dixon swung around in his chair, his face flushed. Webb was sitting alertly beside him. A diminutive Chinese in a long-gown stood between them. An odd thing about him was that he had a cast in one eye.

There was a low-pitched conversation, and Webb left. He went back to the Palace and found Lee and his cousins waiting. Gnau took the wheel and followed Webb's instructions. A thin, dismal mist was falling.

It would increase toward night.

THEY toured Chapei and the French Concession, stopped at the flying field at Lunghwa, and were heading back for the Settlement when Lee suggested they take the Boundary Road. He wanted his cousins to see the farming district. Webb acquiesced, told Gnau the way. Suddenly Lee drew a pistol from his pocket, toyed with it, and asked Webb if he had ever seen one like it.

"I never have," Webb said.

"Shoots great." Lee's grin broadened to a malicious smile. "I filed down the bullets to what we Americans call dum-dums! They make a hole the size of a dime going in and come out like a silver dollar. It's a killer." He laughed. "Ki, show him what you got."

Ki produced a .45 automatic.

The Chinese paid little attention when Webb's hat flew into the road. Gnau stopped the car with a jerk. Lee said something in poor Ningpo; the first time Webb had heard him use Chinese.

The American got out. As he started back for his hat he noticed the trio whispering. They emerged, came after him in single file, catlike.

Suddenly a heavy car shot up behind out of the murk. It stopped with a screech of brakes, and six long-gowned, hulking natives closed in. At their head was a diminutive Chinese who had a cast in one eye.

"Don't shoot," Lee hissed to his companions. "It's a holdup. They're after me." His smile was gone. He was panic-stricken. "They know who I am."

He handed over his pistol without protest. Everyone was frisked, robbed.

"*Bong piau,*" Gnau grunted.

Webb nodded. "Looks like a kidnaping," he agreed. He tried to intercede with the bandits in English, but they shook their heads. The Chinese had no better success.

The bandits produced handcuffs.

They secured the cousins and Webb, and were about to take Lee when tears coursed down his cheek. He fell on his knees and pleaded, begged. Suddenly he brought out a roll of bills as Webb watched closely.

"Here is every dollar I have," Lee

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moaned in Ningpo. " Let me go, you can keep the others. The foreigner is a policeman, he will be ransomed. I'll keep quiet about it."

The diminutive leader came forward. Lee crawled toward him, clasped his knees. Then he arose fawningly, drew the leader aside and began whispering.

Webb and the cousins were herded roughly into the bandits' car.

Lee's voice rose to a piteously whining crescendo. " I'll never tell..."

The leader called his gang. They talked in guttural voices for a long moment. Finally they dismissed Lee with a kick. He ran down the rain-slopped road at top speed. As he left, his eyes caught Webb's. He smiled, winked mockingly, waved.

The leader waited until he was out of sight, then sprang to the American's handcuffs.

" Take these two to headquarters. Notify Mr. Dixon. I'll question them later," Webb said. His jaws set rigidly. " Now we've given him the chance he wanted. He didn't need to have me murdered to get it."

The Chinese nodded, made a suggestion. Webb protested that if he were alone he'd have a better chance. An assistant might be seen and give Lee the tip-off. Webb sprinted after the hurrying figure, now a faint blur. He left so abruptly he forgot to take a pistol.

" If I got you right," he spoke half aloud into the murk, " I know what you're heading for."

AN hour later Lee was turning disgustedly from the steam ferry ticket window on the Customs jetty. The ship was in Pootung, had tied up for the night. The fog was too thick.

He looked around in a frenzy. A huddled group of *lodahs* stood on the far end gazing disconsolately at their sampans moored alongside. He sprang to them with a cry.

Webb glued his eyes on the scene from the shelter of the Customs shed. Lee whined that he had to get across. The *lodahs* were adamant. The rain was too heavy. But in a half hour, perhaps, for two dollars—

He offered five, and they became interested. To spur them to activity he raised it to ten. They jabbered, argued, studied his foreign, rain-drenched clothes with obvious suspicion. When he mentioned fifteen, three of them volunteered. They would go for cash in advance.

He explained that he would get the money on the other side in Pootung. Two gave up. The third hesitated. Lee pounded his back, offered a cash bonus.

But as he talked, Webb saw that the beady eyes were ranging over the sampan captain, noting his emaciated body, his thin, drawn arms. He was little better than skin and bones. A crafty smile hung on Lee's face.

The *lodah* stepped in his sampan, and Lee followed. The rope was cast off and the craft slid down-stream on the current.

Before the grayness claimed it, Webb was following, crouched behind the gunwale of another sampan. They were in mid-stream when a dismal, long-drawn hoot sounded from down river.

Webb recognized the Ranpura. It was her half-hour whistle.

He looked up and saw Lee in the stern, oblivious of the downpour. Abruptly the Chinese turned to glance over his shoulder. A cry broke from his lips.

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Webb squatted too late. He had been seen. He leaped erect and saw Lee frantically urging on his *lodah*. Webb shot a glance around his own craft and located a spare sweep. By the time he had fixed it in position Lee had disappeared.

Suddenly the shadowy form of a pier emerged dead ahead. Before the sampan had touched, before the *lodah* could follow, Webb was ashore. He paused, listened, held his breath. There was no sound save an eerie moaning of fogbound ships. Lee had disappeared as completely as though the river god had swallowed him.

WEBB raced up the dock and found himself on a disused public jetty. The piling had washed away near the bank, but he bridged the chasm in a leap that landed him ankle deep in slime.

He ran up the brief foreshore to a path and strained his ears. Nothing!

His mind probed a dozen theories before arriving at a plan of action. It was not until he recalled Lee's suggestion in the Palace—"If I were a cop I'd put myself in the gang's place"—that his muddled brain functioned.

He put himself in Lee's place, considered the chances of flight. He concluded that on seeing him the Chinese had smelled the trap, dismissed all thoughts of the Ranpura.

He might locate his cache and find a haven on one of the numerous junks anchored opposite the native city. But his foreign mannerisms, his clothes, and the presence of the money would be too strong an incentive for the riverine natives. They would rob, murder him.

He was certain to be recognized should he return to Shanghai. He could flee overland, but his well-kept skin, his inability to speak the dialects, would be his betrayal. His one hope lay in quitting China—quickly.

Suddenly Webb's teeth gritted. He had it. Lee would head for the flying field up-river at Lunghwa, take a chance on catching a plane for Hongkong or Japan.

Webb started running along the path, halting to listen.

He had passed a dozen docks when he heard a gurgling wail. He raced on beyond a discarded bucket scoop, and came to a wooden wall enclosing an abandoned coal yard. He held his breath. The cry was repeated.

He stumbled ahead through the clammy murk and on rounding a turn found a native on the ground moaning. It was Lee's *lodah*. He was holding his head.

As Webb bent over, the Chinese looked up. His face was crimson-streaked from a wide gash over one ear. A short length of blood-encrusted pipe lay at his feet.

A little at one side a pile of freshly turned earth beside a gaping hole in the ground caused Webb's heart to stop.

"I wantchee my money and he killee me," the Chinese whined.

Webb did not wait. He had heard the pounding feet of his *lodah* coming on behind. He asked the direction Lee had taken, and was rewarded with a trembling arm pointing up-river. The American tore on. His hunch was right. Lee was heading for the flying field, and that hole in the ground had been his cache.

He had the money on him!

"COME on, I dare you. Come a step farther and I throw this overboard. Then where's your evidence?" Lee's ebony eyes had be-

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come black buttons in an expanse of yellow flesh. He stood at the edge of the empty dock, poised tauntingly with a tea can held over the swirling yellow water. He had unscrewed the cover, and a bound sheaf of bank notes protruded. His mouth smiled, but his voice was guttural.

" And lose your hundred thousand?" Webb feigned a composure. He knew that once dropped in the churning Whangpoo the can and its contents would be gone beyond hope of recovery.

" Yeh," Lee grinned, " lose it, and I dare you to pin anything on me. You've been a hell of a long time."

A whistle cut suddenly through the murk. Webb strained on tiptoe, peered past Lee's shoulders. Color left the Chinese's face. With a frightened glance at Webb he half turned to locate the menace behind. There was nothing save a gray blanket.

In that split second Webb sprang. He caught Lee with a left hook that missed the jaw, landed on his shoulder. The can fell to the stringpiece, teetered on the edge and remained upright.

Webb saw it in a fleeting, whirling maelstrom of yellow fists, flashing teeth. A knee crashed into his groin. He fell backward, the Chinese toppling over him.

Lee fought with the fury of a beast. Clawing, spitting, his fingers probed for Webb's windpipe. Simultaneously his teeth cut through Webb's suit, searching for a vantage point.

Webb's knees came up; his feet found lodgment in Lee's middle. They straightened with a jerk, and the Chinese was catapulted half across the dock.

By the time he had scrambled to his feet Webb was on him. A hard right over the eye brought a yell of rage. Lee bellowed, gouged. He fell into a crouch and as Webb rushed in the black head came up with a crunching, sickening jerk that made Webb scream with pain.

A cascade of warm, nauseating blood flowed from his nostrils, splayed over his neck and lost itself in the dripping sogginess of his suit. He straightened Lee with a left that crashed against bone while his right shot over with all he had behind it—and missed.

Lee stepped back. Webb closed in, and the Chinese's knee came up a second time. Webb felt the blood leave his head. For a moment he staggered, then the pouring rain seemed to wash free his benumbed brain.

He covered up and as the Chinese came in smashed him over the heart with a left from his waist. Lee stepped back and as Webb closed the flailing arms wound around his neck, the clutching legs locked behind his knees.

Webb fell forward. They were back where the fight had begun. The American thudded a fist into Lee's face. A sudden collapse seemed to come over the Chinese. Webb felt his muscles relax. The American got to his knees, looked down at Lee's bloated, blood-splotched face. Then he felt of his own and knew his nose had been broken.

Lee's eyes were closed, his arms lay impotently at his side. Rain splashed on his matted hair. Webb was struggling to pull himself erect when he heard running feet along the dock.

He looked up and saw the two *lodahs* approaching. Lee's was in the lead, swinging the piece of pipe, growling curses.

As Webb knelt panting there was a faint stirring beneath him. Before he could look down, before he was aware

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of the trap he had fallen into, Lee's foot shot out, knocked the can overboard.

It fell with a splash.

The Chinese's fist had simultaneously started for Webb's face, but with a newly found courage the American went over the side. The tin was a glinting specter of fleeting light in the yellow water.

He dove for it as his heart ceased beating.

His groping fingers clutched it and slowly he came to the surface. As his head broke water he looked around. In the few seconds the rescue had taken he was already swept far down-river.

He shouted, cried out to the extent his straining lungs would let him. The answer was an eerie echo that reverberated hollowly between the enshrouding walls of gray.

FIGHTING, straining to keep his head up, it was several minutes before he made out a dim shape on his left. It towered over him gloomily in the darkness.

He gave a lung-rending scream and was rewarded when a head poked out the wheelhouse. Simultaneously a blurred huddle of heads moved along the deck. She grew closer. Something caught Webb's coat, pulled him in.

Arms reached down and jerked him aboard.

"Ruddy night for a suicide," a voice cut through Webb's half daze. "An' wot's 'e 'uggin' that tea can for?" There was a commotion and a deep voice broke in, "Cap, it's Webb, the bobby..."

A moment later the searing of whisky purged his throat. Someone slapped his face. A suffocating hotness flooded around him. He opened his eyes and recognized the crew of the tug Saucy. He was on a grating in the engine room. His coat was off and he was wrapped in a blanket.

"The police hulk..." was all he could get through chattering teeth.

He felt the list as she swung. Several minutes later the bells clanged and the screw stopped. Webb staggered on deck and saw the river police hulk looming alongside. A group of figures stared down.

He recognized the Assistant Commissioner in charge. Shouting to him, he leaped into the launch moored alongside. Before the Saucy had a line fast a dozen armed police were piling after Webb. There was the whir of a generator and she shot up-river in a spray of yellow foam.

When they found the jetty, Lee's *lodah* had finished what Webb had begun. The first-aid kit patched Lee up so he could be brought back to Shanghai, where Dixon and the police van had been warned by telephone to wait at the Customs dock.

Webb and the tin can were the first ashore. The others were gathered around a prone figure in the stern. As Webb climbed wearily to the dock Dixon looked at him and grinned. Then he noticed the can and laughed. His eyes went back to Webb's nose.

"You'll be a hell of a looking bridegroom," he said. "But I just want to hear anybody rowing about it. The other two confessed plenty. Lee was the brains. It was much like you thought. I told the Commissioner he'd better get more Americans on the force...." He rushed along.

THE trial began a week later, the first day George K. Lee could stand on his feet. He protested for time, that he wanted to bring his lawyer from Frisco. The Chinese judge

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held that if he was innocent he didn't need an imported lawyer.

His snappy American-made suit did him little good in the witness box. The bench in its traditional court robes and purple *fusa* frowned on a Chinese who had so little regard for his ancestors as to revile them by quitting the long-gown. It frowned still more on a Chinese who made a turtle of himself by cutting the swath Lee had in foreign places of amusement. A Chinese should have had more face.

The Chekiang Bank notes completed the picture. The sentence of decapitation was a surprise to no one but George K. Lee.

Five minutes after it had been handed down he came out of the court building to the crowded yard. The Black Maria was waiting. Webb and Dixon were standing by the open door.

" A punk little assistant police sergeant—" Lee began when Dixon cut him off.

" Detective inspector," he corrected. " That's next below an Assistant Commissioner. . ."

" You'd never have nabbed me if I hadn't gone broke," Lee growled. Suddenly his brow contracted; he frowned. " What made me begin spending. . ."

" You were a good guy when you had it," Webb evaded the answer.

" I slayed 'em, didn't I?" Lee smiled quickly, looked around for admiration.

" You sure did."

" If I hadn't been working with those two dumb Chinks, Gnau and Ki," Lee said, " I'd have pulled it off." His face went suddenly grave. He couldn't understand how his downfall had come about. " Webb," he asked abruptly, " I handled it at the start in American fashion; where was the slip?"

" The slip," Webb said, " came when you reverted to a Chinese."

" Hell, I'm no Chinese; look at these clothes. . ."

Dixon cut in to say something, when Lee snapped at him. " Nuts, limey, you couldn't have caught me. It took an American to do it."

He straightened, adjusted his suit, looked around and was happy at the attention he attracted. A cameraman thrust his machine up, and Lee beamed into it.

" He's still a Chinese after ' face,' " Dixon said *sotto voce* to Webb. " Look at him showing off before foreigners."

" Don't be hard on him," Webb put in. " It's his last chance."

The engine roared, an attache beckoned Lee into the van. As he climbed the short steps he hesitated at the top, smiled on the crowd watching.

Webb sighed, turned away.

Dixon pounded his back. " The first job we got for you, Detective Inspector, is to answer a cable that came this morning from the Chief of Police of San Francisco."

Webb looked up blankly. Dixon went on.

" He says they're proud of the American who caught Lee and they're paying the five-thousand-dollar reward though they didn't get their hands on him. Then tonight," he continued, " you're due at the Merchants Guild dinner; they've got a check—"

" Have I got to go?" Webb protested.

" Sure," Dixon said. " If not for yourself—for the force. It gives us ' face.' And after you get through there, I think my daughter would like to see you."

" Fine," Webb said. " I'd like to see her. I've got something to ask—"

THE END

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MEN of DARING
By Clarence Allen
ARTIST EXPLORER
A MAN OF IMAGINATION AND FORTITUDE, LANDOR WAS THE FIRST WHITE MAN TO EXPLORE THE FORBIDDEN LAND OF TIBET. ROAMING THE WORLD'S MOST INACCESSIBLE PLACES, HIS BOLD VENTURES WERE MANY AND VARIED.
A. HENRY SAVAGE LANDOR
A GRANDSON OF WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR, THE ENGLISH POET, HE WAS BORN AT FLORENCE, ITALY IN 1865, AND AS A YOUTH RECEIVED HIS ART EDUCATION IN PARIS. YOUNG LANDOR WAS A SUCCESSFUL ARTIST BUT HE CRAVED ADVENTURE AND HIS INCOME FROM HIS WORK SOON ENABLED HIM TO TRAVEL. TRAVERSING UNBEATEN PATHS IN CHINA, JAPAN AND KOREA, HE WON RECOGNITION AS AN OBSERVANT EXPLORER. HIS BOOK, "ALONE WITH THE HAIRY AINU, OR 3000 MILES ON A PACK SADDLE", WITH ITS VIVID SKETCHES, FURNISHED CONSIDERABLE NEW KNOWLEDGE ABOUT SEVERAL LITTLE KNOWN ABORIGINAL RACES.
IN 1897 LANDOR SET OUT FROM INDIA TO EXPLORE TIBET. WITH 30 NATIVE ATTENDANTS HE HEADED THROUGH HIMALAYAN PASSES, ARRIVING IN THE LAND OF THE LAMAS WITH ONLY ONE BEARER AND A SICK COOLIE, 28 OF HIS ORIGINAL COMPANY HAVING DESERTED ENROUTE. HE CLIMBED MOUNT LAMPA, IN NEPAL, 23,400 FEET, AT THAT TIME THE HIGHEST ASCENT EVER MADE BY MAN.

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THE LAMAS, APPRISED OF LANDOR'S COMING, HAD DESTROYED BRIDGES OVER CHASMS, FORCING HIM TO TAKE HAZARDOUS PATHS. UNDAUNTED, HE HAD EXPLORED THE BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER FOR 150 MILES, REACHING BOTH ITS SOURCES. THEN THE BOLD VENTURER AND HIS TWO ESCORTS WERE SEIZED, PUT IN CHAINS AND TORTURED. THEY WERE FINALLY PUT ON THE "STRETCHING LOG", A RACK WHICH INFLICTED INJURIES TO THE BONES AND MUSCLES.
WHEN HE WAS FINALLY RELEASED HE STRUGGLED BACK TO INDIA NURSING 22 WOUNDS.
IN 1900 LANDOR ACCOMPANIED THE OCCIDENTAL TROOPS IN THEIR MARCH TO PEKING AT THE TIME OF THE BOXER UPRISING. HE WAS THE FIRST ANGLO-SAXON TO ENTER THE CHINESE CAPITAL'S "FORBIDDEN CITY". HE PARTICIPATED IN THE AMERICAN CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE MALANOS, MINDANAO ISLAND, THE PHILIPPINES, IN 1903, GETTING SOME FIRST HAND MATERIAL ABOUT NATIVES LITTLE UNDERSTOOD.
LANDOR CROSSED AFRICA AT ITS WIDEST PART IN 1906, AGAIN ENDURING UNTOLD HARDSHIPS, AND IN THE SAME YEAR HE MADE HIS WAY ACROSS SOUTH AMERICA FROM RIO TO LIMA. IN 1910-12 HE RETURNED TO THAT CONTINENT AND EXPLORED BRAZIL, THE "RIVER OF DOUBT" AND THE ANDES. AT THE START OF THE WORLD WAR HE SERVED THE BELGIANS AS A DISPATCH CARRIER, AND BEFORE THE CONFLICT ENDED HE HAD INSPECTED EVERY FRONT FROM ANTWERP TO SALONIKI.
THE VERSATILE ENGLISHMAN INVENTED AN IMPROVED ARMORED CAR, A NEW TYPE OF AIRSHIP, A DEVICE FOR DESTROYING BARBED WIRE ENTANGLEMENTS, AND AN ARMORED MOTORCYCLE EQUIPPED WITH A SPECIAL MACHINE GUN.

Next Week: Captain Jack Crawford, Poet Scout

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Smooth Kyle, Federal Operative trailing New York's dope-master, decides to beard the lion in his own den

"You'll take this too," said Smooth as he hit her

Midnight Taxi

By BORDEN CHASE

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

PETER KYLE, known to his friends as Smooth, had been a New York taxi driver, so when he became a Federal Operative in the Narcotic Division, he went back to hacking in order to trail down a dope ring. He cultivated the acquaintance of Bet-a-Grand Rudd, gambler and dope user, and finally became one of Rudd's trusted helpers.

Smooth learned that one of the biggest dope rings in the city was headed by Big Spanish, whose headquarters were at the Trocado Club. When one of Spanish's mob tried to force his attentions on Dorothy Manning, a pretty actress, Smooth interfered, and the mobster was killed by Smooth in a gun battle.

By a clever trick, Smooth got the Rudd and Spanish gangs fighting each other. Rudd rigged Smooth out in evening clothes, got a good looking girl, Gilda Garland, to accompany him, and sent him to the Trocado Club to size up the Big Spanish stronghold.

This story began in the Argosy for October 12

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CHAPTER XI.

A HOT PROPOSITION.

THE orchestra whispered a weird tune. Couples drifted onto the dimly-lit floor and moved to the broken rhythm. Drums throbbed and the reeds sent pulsing insinuations through the shadows. The soft swish of leather against polished wood built up the slow *throb—throb—throb* of the strings and woodwinds. Gilda looked at Smooth and lifted her eyebrows slightly.

"I've watched you walk," she said, "and it's like a cat. All the way from the theater I've been anxious to get on the dance floor. Won't you ask me to dance?"

"Sorry," smiled Smooth. "My corns hurt. Another time, perhaps."

"Sure it isn't that shoulder of yours?"

"Is it so noticeable?" he asked.

"No—not to most people. But you see, Smooth, I'm beginning to like you. Maybe I'm studying you too closely."

"Maybe you are," he said. "Suppose you drift those gorgeous eyes of yours around the room and tell me who's who at the Trocado Club. Know anybody?"

"The joint is full of farmers. The three B's are on the loose here tonight."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Brooklyn, Bayonne and the Bronx—all dressed up and rarin' to go. The wise money will come in later."

"Oh, I get it. You're one of those Beautifuls who think that all the brains grow in New York, eh? Get smart, Gilda. They grow hicks a million to the acre in this town."

"Be quiet," she laughed. "You sound like a hackman."

"Maybe I am."

"Now I'll tell one," said Gilda.

She glanced past Smooth's shoulder to an adjoining table. Her eyes narrowed slightly and she searched through her bag for a cigarette. Smooth struck a match and held the flame toward her. She leaned closer and words drifted through the smoke although her lips did not move.

"To your right," she said. "A little fellow . . . thin . . . smart looking . . . he's looking you over."

Smooth nodded as he blew out the flame. He looked casually at the dance floor, studied the orchestra and turned slightly to let his eyes drift toward the adjoining table. It was the one at which he had asked to be seated but which the head waiter had told him was reserved.

Now there was a man, immaculately dressed in a snug-fitting dinner jacket, seated at the table, his arms folded upon the white cloth and his head turned toward the entrance. From Smooth's position his head was in profile, but when he turned Smooth knew him.

It was Lucky Carmine, the hackman. And coming toward him between the tables was another man — a man Smooth had never seen before, but there was no doubt in his mind as to who he was. Lucky Carmine's visitor was Big Spanish.

SMOOTH turned to face Gilda. His left hand dropped into his coat pocket. He slid his chair a few inches farther from the table.

"Got your runnin' shoes, Kid?"

"So soon?" she asked and smiled.

"That's Big Spanish over there," said Smooth quietly. "It looks as though the party is a washout."

"Doesn't he like you?"

"He doesn't know me, but he could work up a quick hate if I was pointed out to him."

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"And who's going to do that?"

"That guy he's talking to—Lucky Carmine. He knows me, and when he tips his mitt there's goin' to be fireworks in this joint."

"Something tells me," said Gilda, "that I'm going to earn my diamond tonight. Why do you boys have to play so rough?"

Smooth laughed. The waiter was setting their meal before them and the head waiter was hovering about superintending the service and according Smooth all the attention that his generous tip deserved. The orchestra had finished its number and the dancers were making their way past the closely spaced tables, some stopping to talk at times to acquaintances and pretending a general hilarity that no one actually felt. It was night club—typically night club—and Smooth realized it was a perfect setting for a killing. He waited until the usual formalities of service were completed and nodded toward the exit.

"It's been nice knowing you, Beautiful," he said. "Sorry we didn't have time to get better acquainted. But you can leave now. Tell Rudd that I said you earned your diamond. He may never know what I mean, but if he doesn't pay off he's welshed on his biggest gamble."

Gilda looked at him in amazement and her eyes asked a thousand questions that Smooth could not answer. He was entitled to one little laugh, he thought. Bet-a-Grand Rudd had been willing to spend a diamond to obtain information about his enemies. He had received more than full value, for now his greatest enemy, the one agent in the Bureau of Narcotics who held his confidence, was on the spot.

"Scram!" he said. "I'll stay put until you make your break."

Gilda lifted a glass of wine, sipped, and studied him across the rim. She held the glass away from her mouth and Smooth noticed that there was not a ripple on the surface of the liquor. There was admiration in his eyes when they met hers and he raised his own glass in a silent salute to courage. She lifted her fork and picked at the entrée.

"I never run out, Smooth," she said. "And, besides, I like you. I think I told you that before."

"Don't be a sucker," he said. "I've got goose pimples chasin' up and down my back. And I'm not keepin' that back turned toward those birds any longer. When I turn around, somethin' is goin' to happen. Be smart—scram!"

She shook her head slowly, put down her fork and opened the clasp of her bag. Smooth looked past her fingers and saw the glint of a gun barrel. There was a hardness in her smile now and her lips were thin.

"You may turn when ready, Gridley," she laughed. "The marines haven't landed, but I think we have the situation well in hand."

Smooth laughed too—and turned to face Lucky Carmine.

For a moment the little hackman's eyes locked with Smooth's. He grinned and lifted his hand carelessly.

"How ya, feller?" he said.

SMOOTH winked and waited. He saw Lucky's lips move in whispered speech to Big Spanish. Spanish nodded pleasantly toward Smooth, patted Lucky upon the shoulder and walked to another table. Lucky pushed back his chair and came slowly toward Smooth.

"You're full of surprises, Smooth," he said. "Can I sit a minute?"

Smooth stood up and pointed to an empty chair beside Gilda.

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"Glad to have you with us, Lucky," he said and turned to Gilda. "This is Mr. Carmine—we call him Lucky." Gilda favored Lucky with her most innocent stare, lifted an eyebrow and smiled. "Meet Miss Garland," continued Smooth. "I call her Beautiful—but you mustn't."

Lucky seated himself and Smooth ordered the waiter to bring an extra glass. When the wine was poured, the little hackman raised his glass to Gilda and wet his lips. He turned to Smooth, hunched forward slightly, and nodded his head in an almost imperceptible tilt toward the girl.

"What shall I say?" he asked.

The question in itself sounded like a polite attempt at conversation—the usual preliminary to a bit of table talk. But Smooth knew that Lucky had asked him quite plainly—"How about this girl? Does she know anything about you? Can I talk freely, or shall I stall?"

"Give—Lucky," said Smooth. "Gilda is the girl friend. My business is her business. What's on your mind?"

"And I don't understand much English," added Gilda.

"Smart girl," said Lucky. "But I should have known — a friend of Smooth's would have to be smart." He turned the stem of his glass between his fingers. "What're you doin' here, Smooth?"

"Listenin' to bum music and drinkin' wine that's only so-so. Why?"

"It don't make sense. I told you this was a hot spot for you and two nights later I find you here. If I tipped my mitt to Spanish, you'd get a swell funeral."

"Did you?"

"Why should I? I got nothin' against you, feller."

"I'm glad of that," said Smooth. "Now, suppose I give it to you straight?"

"I'm listenin'."

"Why should I duck Spanish? I got jammed in a scrap with some of his boys when I was drivin' Rudd. It wasn't my quarrel—I didn't know what it was all about. From then on I was careful to keep my nose clean. Why should Spanish hold it against me? I don't want to shove a hack in this town and expect to find a bullet waitin' for me at the end of each call. So I figured to have a talk with Spanish tonight and see where I stand."

LUCKY'S glass went around and around. He watched the wine slip past the rim and flicked a tiny piece of cork aside with the tip of his little fingernail. He seemed to be weighing Smooth's words — probing for the thoughts behind them and thinking.

"That sounds fair enough," he said at length. "But maybe it would be better not to spring it on Spanish tonight. There was a jam in front of the club this mornin' and he's edgy."

Smooth noticed that Lucky's eyes had lifted from the wine as he spoke and that they were now drilling into his own. He tilted a cigarette into his mouth before he answered and fumbled for a match.

"I read about that," he said. "What's the low-down?"

"I wouldn't know. A dame, I think. Maybe it's this Manning girl that works in one of Spanish's shows. Rudd likes her."

Smooth caught the quick glance that Gilda flashed toward him. There was a world of knowing laughter hidden behind it and he set his heel firmly upon her instep and pushed down—hard. She caught his cheek lightly between

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her fingertips, drew his head toward her and kissed his ear. When he drew away, the prints of her nails were two tiny red crescents in his cheek.

"See what love does to a gal, Lucky?" she laughed.

Smooth searched for that instep again, but she had drawn both feet beneath her chair. He lit his cigarette.

"How about it, Lucky?" he asked. "Does that put me in the clear?"

"Just about," said Lucky. "But maybe you're wondering about me."

"You guessed it. For a guy that's playin' it legit, you're careless as hell with your dough. The cover charge in this joint must set you back a night's bookin'."

"Not me," said Lucky. "I get off light. And as long as that blonde of yours is chucking kisses around I'll let my hair down and wise you to a love affair. I go for the little hat check girl in a big way. Don't laugh when I tell you we're figurin' on gettin' married soon as I quit hackin'. She's a corn-fed kid—a country member, and we're goin' to run a farm in the sticks. You know—cows, ducks and all that. We've been savin' our dough, and it won't be long now."

"Congratulations, feller," said Smooth. "Glad to hear it."

"Yeah, it's on the level. I know Spanish a little—played the line in front of his club for a while. He gives me a break and knocks off the cover charge. Let's the kid sit with me, too, when it ain't too busy. She'll be over, after."

The music started and they watched the dancers for a moment. The floor was not overcrowded, and Smooth saw that Lucky was watching him with a slight frown of bewilderment. He caught the little hackman's eye and nodded toward Gilda.

"She's slow and dreamy on her feet," said Smooth. "Try over the floor—maybe you'll get a brass ring."

"Fallen arches?" asked Lucky. "You used to be quite a stepper, Smooth. Why don't you dance?"

"Gentlemen," said Gilda, "you're tearing me to pieces. If you both insist upon dancing with me I won't know how to choose between you. You eggs!"

"That puts it up to you, Lucky," said Smooth, and stood to draw back Gilda's chair.

THE little hackman led Gilda out onto the floor and Smooth waved carelessly to them as they went by. Lucky's story sounded legitimate enough, and Smooth knew that a night club owner often made a concession to a smart taxi driver. There had been a time when the owners of these night spots had paid as high as thirty per cent of the total amount of the bill to the hackman who had brought a party of chumps to spend money in his place. Some of the oldtime clip joints had existed wholly through the trade that was brought to them by the night drivers.

Things were different now, but it was reasonable enough to suppose that Lucky still brought an occasional customer with money to spend at the Trocado. Spanish wasn't losing anything by his generosity. And as for the romance with the hat check girl—that was a natural. Smooth had known dozens of girls who worked in night clubs, both in the check rooms and in the floor shows. It seemed to be the accepted thing for these Broadwayites to sit and drink with millionaires and marry a hackman. It was the old story. They made fools of hundreds of men and went overboard for one.

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Yes, Lucky Carmine was all right. He might be shading it a little when he bragged about being legitimate, and he might be close to Spanish, but his story checked. Smooth felt a great deal more comfortable when Lucky and Gilda returned to the table than he had when he first saw Carmine and Spanish together. There was nothing but a gunshot wound in his shoulder to connect him with any of the recent killings, and Smooth had no intention of letting that throw him.

He insisted that Lucky stay at their table for another drink, and poured it himself. Carmine watched the wine trickle into the glass. He put a cigarette between his lips, but made no move to light it. Smooth struck a match and held the flame across the table.

"That's funny," said Lucky. "I never knew you were left-handed. Can you imagine that"—he turned to Gilda—"I've known this bloke for years and never clicked that he was a southpaw."

"Oh, I knew it," said Gilda lightly. "He always uses his left hand to beat me with."

Smooth was sorry for the under-table play he had permitted himself. Gilda hadn't deserved the heel on her instep. She was a regular—a good fellow!

"Speaking of southpaws," said Lucky, "I got a great gag to show you. I read this in a story once and it always works—never knew it to fail."

"What is it?" said Gilda.

"Got any book matches?" asked Lucky. "You know—the ones in the cardboard folder."

SMOOTH found a package that had probably been in his vest pocket for a week, and flipped them across the table. Carmine picked them up and held them for a moment without opening the cover.

"Now this is the gag—see?" he said. "There was a detective lookin' for a criminal. He wasn't one of them ordinary flatties that hangs out in the Forty-Seventh Street Stationhouse—this was a scientific bloke. He used psychology—"

"Who?" asked Gilda.

"He used his skull," continued Lucky. "Instead of puttin' the pressure on a stool and milkin' him for all he knew, this guy sat down and did it all with his brains. Well—he visited the scene of the crime and found a package of book matches like these"—he extended the matches—"lying beside the murdered guy."

"Who was murdered and why?" asked Gilda suddenly.

"Say," said Lucky, "do I tell this story—or don't I?"

"Not if I can stop you," laughed Gilda. "I've had to listen to it forty times—or maybe it was fifty."

"Where do you get these smart gals, Smooth?" protested Lucky.

"Go ahead with the story," laughed Smooth. "Ignore her completely."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Gilda. Her speech was light, but to Smooth it seemed to be strained. He glanced quickly at her and saw that her eyes were trying desperately to tell him something.

"Well," said Lucky. "The story goes that a guy was murdered and the matches was lyin' beside him. The detective picked them up—opened the cover and said, 'The mug that pulled this job was *left-handed*.'"

"Ahaaaa!" said Gilda. "Old Sherlock himself. Now I'll tell one. It seems that there was a traveling salesman—"

Smooth knew that a game was being played at the table. Gilda was trying

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to keep Lucky from finishing his story. His mind whirled back in review of all the tales he had heard concerning book matches. But he drew a blank.

"So how did he know?" demanded Lucky.

"I give up," said Smooth.

"Because"—and Lucky opened the cover of the matches—"on account of the guy bein' left-handed the matches were torn out from left to right. Like these—"

He extended the matches, stared at them foolishly for a moment and grinned. Half the package was empty. And the matches had been torn out from right to left.

Gilda's lips were tight. She was toying with her bag, nervously opening and closing the clasp. Smooth stiffened. He realized all too well now the trap that Gilda had been trying to talk him out of. He saw quick suspicion on Lucky's face and noted the speed with which the hackman's glance swept toward his right arm. He winked to Gilda and lifted the bottle of wine to refill her glass—using his right hand. The pain that tore through his shoulder set the dim lights of the night club spinning in a dizzy procession.

"That one bounced back and bit you, Lucky," he said. And his mouth was dry as he spoke. "I use both hands—like a wop eatin' spaghetti."

"You know," said Lucky, "that's the first time I ever missed out with that gag."

SMOOTH rested his right arm upon the table and waited for the pain to subside. His stomach was quivery and sick, and thin beads of perspiration gathered on his forehead. Gilda had launched into a rather risque story to distract Lucky's attention, and Smooth silently applauded his partner's coolness. She had turned the full battery of her charm upon Carmine. Her voice was low, confidential and throaty. Her eyes were alight with flattery and promise. She played up to Lucky as though he were visiting royalty—and the thin shouldered hackman wriggled comfortably and listened.

He was laughing at another of Gilda's stories when Smooth saw Big Spanish threading his way between the tables that separated them from the door. The huge gangster was bowing and nodding to various acquaintances and breaking a path through the crowd for a girl who followed him. They were heading towards Smooth's table, and he noticed a flare of anger in the girl's eyes as she caught sight of Lucky.

Carmine turned just then and saw her. He was on his feet in an instant, his lips parted in a thin smile and his hands outstretched.

"Theresa—I didn't think you'd get off so early," he said. He caught her hands, squeezed them and turned to Big Spanish. "Thanks for the break, feller. And I want you to meet a pal of mine — shake hands with Smooth Kyle; he hacks with me."

Big Spanish extended a wide paw and Smooth set his teeth. He lifted his injured arm, set his hand in that of Spanish and braced himself for the shock. Spanish squeezed. The night club reeled and spun. Smooth shuddered and tried a sickly smile.

"Glad to know you," he said, thinly. "Meet Miss Garland, and grab a chair."

Spanish bowed to Gilda and received one of those blue-eyed, baby stares. He grinned, lifted his hand automatically to his small mustache and twirled one end. Smooth saw him go overboard and counted the screaming pain in his shoulder as paid for.

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Lucky was standing beside Theresa, one arm about her waist and the other hand clasped in the crook of her elbow. Smooth caught the girl studying him and guessed that little got past those dark eyes.

She was one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen, but it was a beauty far different from that of the usual Broadway standard. Her hair was blue-black and drawn tightly back from her forehead. Her eyes were brown with large black pupils that gathered the light from the dim table lamp and sent it flashing in reflected brilliance. And the wisdom of centuries was in those eyes—inherited knowledge that had been passed through generations of Italian ancestors from the time of the Borgias. Her coloring was just off the white—like old ivory that had been kept from the sun. She used no make-up except for a touch of scarlet on her full lips. Smooth knew that when she smiled her teeth would show in an even, white line. But she was not smiling now—instead, she acknowledged Lucky's hurried introductions with a direct stare that was naked as steel and equally hard.

Smooth called for more chairs, and insisted that it was his party. He waved aside the protests of both Spanish and Carmine, ordered more wine and told them to settle down for a large evening. Gilda was being nasty nice. The opposite personalities of the two women had needed no spur to set them at war and a battle of wits was under way.

BIG SPANISH lifted his glass and toasted Gilda's blond loveliness. And it was with obvious reluctance that he turned his attention toward Smooth. He stared at him for a moment, tilted one eyebrow and leaned forward.

"It's funny I don't make you," he said. "If you been shovin' a hack with Lucky I must 'a' seen you before. How come we don't know each other?"

"I been away," said Smooth.

"Yeah? How long?"

"Long enough. But I think you opened a place in the Village just before I quit—The Candle Flame, or some name like that."

"Yeah," said Lucky. "Smooth's an oldtimer. He knows his way around. I was thinkin' you might want to talk to him."

Spanish nodded wisely and winked at Smooth.

"We might do business," he said.

"Okay with me," said Smooth. "But first I want to come clean. Lucky tells me you had a knock-off this mornin' and you might be a little hot. But I'll gamble. I'm the guy that was drivin' Rudd the other day in the park. He's no pal of mine, but I happened to be shovin' the rig when the storm broke. So—how do I stand?"

Smooth watched Spanish's face closely. This should have been dynamite to the gangster. Anything might happen—a stream of curses, a sudden fit or even a blazing gun. In any event the news should have given him a start. But he took it without a tremor. Not a muscle moved in his face, nor did he show any sign of surprise. Smooth was puzzled. It didn't make sense, unless—unless Spanish already knew about Smooth. Those whispered words from Lucky may have been the answer. And if so, why had Lucky lied?

"That was a fast play, feller," said Spanish. "It took guts to sling that in my teeth—and I like you for it. You must be on the level or you'd never have tipped your mitt. Suppose we step

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out to the bar and have a little talk? The gals can take us apart while we're gone."

"Do you mind?" said Smooth to Gilda.

"Sure I mind," she answered. "But what good does that do? Go ahead—roll your hoop. Theresa and I will struggle along."

The men left the table and walked to a small bar that was curved in a horseshoe at the far end of the club. Spanish led them to a spot near the wall, hooked one elbow upon the polished surface and nodded to the bartender.

"Lansons—on the house," he said and turned to Smooth. "We'll drink and figure a deal. Can you stand to make a few spare bucks?"

"Why not?"

"Do you okay this guy, Lucky?"

"A hundred per cent," said the little hackman. "Me—I can't afford to gamble like he does. I'm a piker on account of the lungs. But any guy what can sling a champagne party after two night's hackin' must know his oats. We met for the first time in years just the other night. At the time he don't look like he's worth a pretzel. Now he's in the money—swell lookin' blonde and everything. That's what I call fast work."

SMOOTH saw admiration in Spanish's eyes. But there was also a question, unspoken but definite. Lucky had given him a clean bill of health, but had been careful not to let his recommendation cover the past few years. Carmine wanted no quarrel with Spanish, and while he was ready to put in a good word, Smooth noticed that the hackman was careful with his words. If things went wrong, Spanish could not hold it against Carmine.

"What's your racket?" asked the gangster.

"Drivin' a hack," said Smooth evenly. "The tips are big when you get good customers."

"There's fifty thousand taxi drivers in this town and I never met one that wasn't havin' a tough time payin' his rent," laughed Spanish. "But you're different, eh?"

"Yeah—I'm different. So what?"

"Ever been to Mexico?"

"Tijuana and a few spots near the line. Why?"

"Wanna hook up with an outfit down there?"

Smooth helped himself to a drink. It was as though he had bought three cards to an ace and king, and filled a royal! Rudd had sent him for information and Big Spanish wanted to deal him into the organization! And what would McNeary think of this situation? Smooth could almost see those blue eyes twinkle and a thousand wrinkles gather around them as he heard about it.

He needed time to think and it was going to require some smooth stalling to keep Spanish dangling until he figured his next move. To sign up with the outfit would put him in a position that might prove invaluable for Rudd. But would McNeary approve? It would take Smooth out of the New York area and drop him in some flea-bitten town over the border. True, it would also reveal the method Spanish used for getting his narcotics into the country, but that was only one angle of the case.

"What's the set-up?" he asked. "Booze or Chinamen?"

"Why worry?" asked Spanish. "The dough is there—plenty of it. It's a pushover—no chance of a pinch. Wadda ya say?"

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"Will it keep for a few hours? I'd like to sit with it over a bottle of wine." Spanish shrugged and looked toward the table where the girls were sitting.

"Suit yourself," he said.

THEY left the bar and took their places at the table. Gilda threw a questioning glance at Smooth and he nodded slightly toward Big Spanish. She set down her glass and smiled at the gangster.

"Broadway says you're quite a dancer," she said.

"Broadway don't know the half of it," he laughed and pushed back his chair. "I'm practically a sensation—with blondes."

When they left the table, Smooth drew his chair closer to Lucky and Theresa. He filled their glasses and spun a thin stream of tobacco smoke toward the dance floor.

"Spanish thinks he's what little blondes cry for," he said. "For a guy with a big organization he don't seem so smart to me."

"You can't guess 'em by their fronts," said Lucky.

"Sometimes you can," said Theresa and looked at Smooth. "You—you're smart. I've been talking to your girl friend and she doesn't know any more about you than I do. A man who can keep his women guessing must be clever."

"Maybe you're underrating Gilda," laughed Smooth.

"Don't fool yourself," she said. "She didn't say anything because she didn't *know* anything. Oh, she's smart enough to take Spanish for a waltz when you tip her a nod, but that lets her out."

"This baby don't miss a thing," laughed Lucky. "Sometimes I think she's got eyes in the back of her head."

"Maybe she can tell me if I ought to take up Spanish's proposition," suggested Smooth.

"That's one you'll have to ask Goo-Goo Eyes about when she comes in off the dance floor," said Theresa. "I have enough trouble callin' the shots for Lucky."

"All right, call this one. Spanish wants me to go to Mexico and he says there's money in it. If Lucky goes, I go—fair enough?"

"Don't be a sap!" she snapped. "Lucky ain't after any hot money. Cut your own throat if you want, but leave him out of it. He's savin' up to buy a farm."

"Yeah," laughed Lucky. "With cows and ducks. When these dames get set on a thing nothin' can change them—ain't it the truth?"

The music had stopped and Big Spanish was holding a chair for Gilda. A waiter hurried through the crowds leaving the dance floor, and when the gangster seated himself he leaned above Big Spanish's shoulder and whispered into his ear.

Spanish started. He brought the palm of his hand against the table top with a force that set the glasses jingling.

"T'hell you say!" he barked and turned quickly toward Lucky. "They got Winkie and Grumbach!"

CHAPTER XII.

A SMOOTH PLAY.

SMOOTH wanted to smile. When he had asked McNeary to pick up those two dope peddlers he did not expect to be in on the play when the news of their disappearance was announced to Spanish. It was a peculiar twist of circumstances that put him in

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a position to see the result of his carefully planned move. He had figured that this would be the last straw—that Spanish would actively swing into action when he heard that two of his men were missing. There could be no doubt in the gangster's mind as to the reason. Winkie and Grumbach were the only men with whom Rudd had come in contact in his purchase of narcotics. And now they were gone—plucked from the streets by an unseen hand. Smooth stared indolently at the cloth, penciled a series of boxes upon it with the burnt head of a match, and listened.

"When did this happen?" asked Lucky.

"How the hell do I know?" said Spanish. "They're gone, ain't they? *That's* what counts—and I know who did it. I'm gonna—"

"*We're* going out to powder our noses," said Theresa suddenly. She got quickly to her feet and tapped Gilda upon the shoulder. "C'mon, baby—outside while the gentlemen talk."

Gilda stared at her coldly for a minute. She looked at Smooth and when he nodded in agreement she left the table and followed Theresa to the ladies' room. Smooth pushed back his chair and looked inquiringly at Spanish.

"Want me to scram too?" he asked.

"Stay where you are," snapped Spanish. "You ain't goin' to hear anything." He turned to Lucky and his lips were thin. "How about it?" he asked. "Do I send the boys over to rub out that louse with the hook nose?"

"I wouldn't know," said Lucky quietly. His eyes were on the diagrams that Smooth was drawing. "It would take a smarter guy than me to guess that one. Why don't you go out to the bar and think it over?"

Spanish grunted and kicked back his chair with such force that it toppled to the floor. He barged through the tables, shouldering his way past laughing couples with little regard for the damage he did to shirt fronts and evening gowns. When he had disappeared through a door that led off the bar Lucky grinned a twisted smile and tapped Smooth on the arm.

"That guy is screwy," he said. "Sometimes he chucks questions at me like I was a mind reader. I never answer because he wouldn't listen anyway."

"He certainly is hot tonight," said Smooth. "It's a wonder he don't get himself knocked off when he boils over that way. Why don't you go out and try to cool him off?"

"That might be a good idea," said Lucky, and stood up. "Tell Theresa I'll be right back. She's a smart kid, eh, Smooth?—takin' Gilda away so she wouldn't learn something that might get her in trouble."

Smooth nodded in agreement, and when Lucky had gone he wondered if there had been a lightly veiled threat in the hackman's last remark. It might be that Carmine was trying to tell him he had heard too much and that it was a case of throw in with Spanish or else—

HE glanced quickly about to see if anyone was watching him and then drew an envelope from his coat pocket. He tore a scrap from the corner and penciled a warning that he knew would put Rudd on his guard. It was a long chance, but Smooth did not want a few of Big Spanish's gunmen to upset his plans by killing Rudd. He folded the note into a compact ball, squeezed it between the first and second fingers of his right hand and looked up

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to see Theresa and Gilda coming toward him.

"Where's Lucky?" said Theresa in alarm.

"Just stepped to the bar. He'll be right back, in fact here he is comin' across the dance floor now."

Carmine was all smiles when he joined them and he waved a careless hand toward the bar as though in dismissal of Spanish.

"He's all right now. He cools off quick. Nothin's goin' to happen."

"Why *should* anything happen?" asked Gilda.

"Keep your damn trap shut," said Smooth suddenly. "You dizzy blondes are all alike—always askin' questions."

"What's eating you?" snapped Gilda. "Been drinking too much wine?"

"If I have, it's my money that's buyin' it. And as long as you started it, let me tell you something else—when you're with me send those baby stares in my direction. You been flirtin' with every guy in the place while I sit here like a chump."

Lucky was grinning from ear to ear and he nudged Theresa carefully as though to make sure that she was appreciating the joke. Cynicism and bewilderment mingled in Theresa's face. She half turned towards Smooth in evident surprise and then watched to see what would be Gilda's reaction. The tall blonde jumped up in sudden anger. One hand was clenched upon the table and the knuckles were white.

"I don't have to take that from you," she flared. "I'm not your wife!"

"You'll take it and like it. And this, too," barked Smooth. He was on his feet also, and his left hand caught Gilda a stinging blow across the cheek.

She jerked a glass of wine from the table and emptied it in Smooth's eyes. He lifted his right hand as though to drive it against her mouth. She reached forward instinctively and grabbed the hand. The pain in his shoulder brought his teeth together with a snap, but he worked the folded note against Gilda's open palm and felt her fingers close about it. A single swift stare from those wide eyes told him that she understood and was following his lead. Theresa stepped between them and pushed Smooth toward his chair.

"Sit down, you fool," she said. "The first rule of this place is drink here and fight at home. You're acting like a couple of two-year-olds."

"Sure, Smooth," said Lucky. "Wait until you get in the back of a hack before you put on a panic."

"T'hell with her," said Smooth in disgust. "She's always startin' a jam some place."

"That goes double with me," said Gilda, and gathered her wrap from the back of the chair. "I'm washed up on this party. Good night!"

She looked Smooth over slowly from his dripping forehead to his shoes, turned and walked out of the night club.

"And that," said Lucky, "seems to take care of everything."

"Does it?" asked Theresa and turned a long steady stare upon Smooth.

FOR a moment he was too satisfied with the success of the little act he had staged to think about Theresa. Gilda had come through like a major. There was no doubt in Smooth's mind as to what she would do next. He could almost see her stepping into a phone booth and passing the information along to Rudd. As she had heard nothing at the table, she could in no way be accused of warning the gam-

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bler. Thanks to Theresa, Gilda had a perfect alibi—one that would even satisfy the suspicious minds of Big Spanish's mob.

As for himself, there was nothing that Smooth could do but sit tight and play his hand out. In spite of Lucky's statement that Big Spanish did not intend any reprisals, Smooth was certain that a car full of killers was on the way to Rudd's apartment. He would have enjoyed seeing their reception, but he consoled himself with the thought that he was less apt to collect another bullet in the Trocado Club than he would be at Rudd's place. Yes, he could afford to miss this show—there would probably be bigger and better affairs in the future.

He helped himself to another glass of wine, and it was then that he noticed Theresa's dark eyes watching him. Lucky made no move to dance with the girl, and Smooth realized he was not to be left alone that evening. He attempted an apology to Theresa for his lack of manners, but she cut him short with a wise smile.

"You smart guys certainly can do stupid things when you're out with women," she said slowly.

It was a simple remark and could have referred to Smooth's boorish actions. But some subtle shading in the tone of her voice brought Smooth sharply to attention and made him wonder. Had Theresa seen him pass that note? And was she telling him? Again he searched his memory for any sign that would have clarified Lucky's standing with Spanish. They were close—there was no doubt about that. But Smooth was inclined to believe that the hackman took no active part in the work of the Big Spanish mob. Theresa had not been acting when she turned thumbs down on Smooth's suggestion that both he and Lucky go to Mexico. There had been sharp conviction in her voice then. And suddenly he became aware of the fact that he was judging Theresa by the fluctuations in the tones of her speech.

He led the conversation back to hacking. Both he and Lucky told of their experiences driving taxis through the streets of Manhattan. Theresa was at ease now. She laughed with them and added interesting tales of the night clubs. At times she spoke of the farm they intended to buy, and at such times her voice was low, wistful and pleasant. When Smooth mentioned Rudd and speculated upon the wealth and power the gambler must have acquired there came a subtle difference in Theresa's answers.

Lucky was always at ease. He smiled, joked and teased Theresa unmercifully. When Smooth asked him a direct question he shrugged it aside or made a noncommittal answer.

There were but two other occupied tables when Big Spanish came through the door beside the bar and spoke to the head waiter. The orchestra had long since finished the last number and left. A tired-looking band boy sat at the piano, a constant cigarette drooping from one corner of his mouth and his shoulders curved in a bow. His fingers stopped their restless fluttering over the keys when Big Spanish nodded. He stood up, stretched, flicked the butt at a waiter who was clearing away a table cloth, and shuffled to the door. The two remaining parties settled their checks and lurched out into the night.

BIG SPANISH crossed the empty dance floor and seated himself opposite Smooth. He glanced at Gilda's chair and lifted his eyebrows inquiringly.

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"Where's the girl friend?"

"Aw, I had to slow her down," said Smooth. "She was burnin' up the joint. She went home."

"Oh, yeah?" said Spanish suspiciously. "Now ain't that funny. I send the boys out to give Rudd the works and he meets them half way and rubs out three of them. But your dame couldn't know anything about that—could she?"

"What's the gag?" demanded Smooth. "You tryin' to say she framed you?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you're wrong. She didn't know a thing—neither did I. Gilda and me have been pals from 'way back. She's on the level. If your boys let Rudd slip one across, it ain't no fault of hers or mine either. Ask Lucky—I been sittin' with him all night."

"That's straight, Spanish," said Lucky. "You got no quarrel with Smooth or his girl. They're in the clear. Suppose you tell us what happened?"

"Suppose you *don't!*" said Theresa and her voice was sharp. "Your business ain't any of ours, Spanish. Keep it under your hat."

"Fair enough," said Spanish. "But I'll tell you this much—I'm sort of short-handed just now and I could use a few men. There's some of my boys in Mexico that want to see the Big Town again." He turned and tapped Smooth lightly on the arm. "I can use you—see? If you want to do me a little favor you might get a lot healthier than you are right now."

"In other words," said Smooth, "my chances of gettin' out of this joint tonight ain't so good, eh?"

"Not if you're gonna be stubborn."

"So—what else can I do? Deal me in."

"Smart guy," said Spanish. "You start at a hundred a week—clear. There's plenty more where that comes from if you're wise. The job I got for you is practically a vacation, and if you want to take Blondie along, so much the better."

"Why don't you leave her out of it?" snapped Theresa.

"Aw, be nice," laughed Lucky. "Smooth'll do better to take along a gal he knows. Suppose he gets foolin' around with some strange dame down there? Then what?"

"Take her along," said Spanish. "Be at the Newark airport tomorrow afternoon and grab the plane to the coast. There'll be two tickets waitin' for you—Mr. and Mrs. Kyle."

"That's my real tag, Spanish," said Smooth. "Why use it?"

"Because what you're goin' to do is on the up and up. I'm tellin' you, it's the softest job you ever had. Just listen close and stop askin' questions." He hunched forward across the table and emphasized his words by jabbing a heavy forefinger at the cloth as he spoke. "When you get to the coast, report to Ed Jordan at the Trayton Hotel in Los Angeles. He'll be expectin' you because I'll shoot him a wire tonight. And from then on, just do as he tells you—get it?"

"So I go away on the blind, eh?" said Smooth. "Can't you open up and give me a little info on the deal?"

"Take it or leave it, feller."

"It's goin' to be plenty hot in Mexico when Gilda starts chuckin' those blue eyes at the peasants. But you win!"

SMOOTH stood up and beckoned to a waiter. He drew a few bills from his pocket and picked up the check. Spanish reached up and took it from his hand, tore it in half and dropped it on the floor.

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"This party is on me, Smooth," he said and smiled. "Be a smart kid and there'll be plenty more of them when you get back."

Smooth shrugged and patted Lucky on the shoulder.

"So long, feller," he said. "Look out for the horse cars and bicycles." He caught Theresa's ear between thumb and forefinger and shook it lightly. "Keep a quart of milk on ice when you get that farm goin'," he laughed. "We'll split it together when I get back."

He started toward the door and Lucky lifted a glass of wine from the table. He raised it toward Smooth and grinned.

"I'll be seein' ya," he said. "If you meet any nice bulls, ship 'em to Theresa. We'll stock up the farm."

When Smooth stepped into the street the first hint of morning was in the sky above the Sixth Avenue Elevated structure. He breathed deeply, walked to the subway entrance at Fiftieth Street and Broadway and went slowly down the steps. He rode north to Seventy-second Street, left the subway and hailed a passing taxi. He directed the driver into the park and glanced through the rear window to make sure that no car was following.

When they swung into Times Square he paid off the driver and hurried to the hotel where McNeary was stopping. The door of the Chief's room opened instantly to his knock and Smooth was surprised to find McNeary fully dressed.

"Don't you ever sleep?" he asked.

"Not when one of my men is playing with dynamite," smiled McNeary. "You've kept four other men awake, too. And they've had one sweet job keeping an eye on you."

"Thanks for the trouble, Chief. But I was sitting pretty all night. It's a long story and it's going to hand you an awful jolt. But before I start, how's Dorothy?"

McNeary stepped to the door of the adjoining room and opened it. Smooth glanced over his shoulder and grinned from ear to ear when he saw Dorothy sleeping in an easy chair.

"What's the idea?" he asked.

"She hasn't learned to take orders yet," said McNeary quietly. "I've told her to go home and go to bed at least a dozen times, but it's no use. She came here directly from the theater and spent the rest of the night wondering if you were going to get killed. It seems she likes you—but I'm damned if I know why."

"She's a grand kid."

"As nice as that blonde you were mauling in the theater?" asked Dorothy suddenly and lifted one eyelid to squint at Smooth.

"Oh, you *did* see me, eh?" laughed Smooth. "And why didn't you wriggle your nose or say hello?"

"You were so interested in that clinging vine beside you that I didn't think you'd be interested. Who is she?"

"She used to be Gilda Garland—but now she's Mrs. Peter Kyle."

"*What?*" said Dorothy and McNeary in unison.

SMOOTH roared with laughter at their astonished expressions and proceeded to outline the story of his night's experience. He told them of meeting Gilda at Rudd's place and his instructions to obtain information from Big Spanish for the gambler. When he told of the raiding expedition that Spanish had sent out in an effort to trap Rudd, McNeary's face was grim.

"That was a sweet little mess," said the Chief. "Three of Spaniard's men

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were killed and two of Rudd's, according to the police."

"Where did it happen?" asked Smooth.

"Not far from Rudd's place."

"The way things look now, it won't be long before those two mobs clean each other out."

"You ought to know better than that," grunted McNeary. "It doesn't work out that way. New men keep feeding into the organizations as fast as the old are wiped out. No—we'll never get rid of the mobs that way, although I admit it helps."

"Saves a lot of expensive trials," said Smooth. "And a parole board can't turn a killer loose from his coffin. Well, now you're due for a little surprise—I'm goin' to Mexico."

Dorothy and the Chief listened attentively while Smooth explained to them how he had come to sign up with Big Spanish. When he said that he was to leave for the coast later in the day with Gilda there was evident displeasure in Dorothy's eyes.

"Why must she go with you?" she asked. "Don't you expect to have enough trouble without taking along another armful—and she's quite an armful, too."

"You noticed that, eh?" teased Smooth. "A girl with your eyes ought to do well in the Bureau of Narcotics and you're right about that 'armful of trouble' as you call her. She's working for Rudd, and if I'm not mistaken he'll know every move I make, even before the Chief does."

"It sounds like a fine night's work," said McNeary. "My advice is that you catch that plane—go to the coast and find out how Big Spanish is getting his supplies of narcotics into the country. Report to Martensen in Los Angeles; he's supervisor of that district and he'll coöperate with you in any way possible. I'll wire him before you leave and he'll be expecting you. As for the details of the work, I'm afraid that is pretty much up to you."

"How about Rudd? Who's going to handle him while I'm gone?"

"Turn about is fair play," said Dorothy suddenly. "While you're honeymooning at the coast why not let me keep an eye on Rudd?"

"That sounds all right," said Smooth, "but it wouldn't work out. Rudd's a cagey bird. He'd throw you for a loss in no time. He's smart, suave and vicious as the devil. If he got wise to you he'd rub you out like an extra period. Sorry—that's out!"

"Just when did you corner the supply of brains?" she smiled. "I'll guarantee that I have less trouble handling Rudd than you will with that platinum-topped partner of yours."

McNEARY laughed until the tears rolled down his cheeks. He laid a friendly hand upon Dorothy's shoulder and shook her gently. When he spoke it seemed to Smooth that he was listening to a proud parent expounding the virtues of an only child.

"I'm afraid you're underrating this little lady, Smooth," he said kindly. "She and I have had some long talks and I'm willing to back her judgment any time. Now let's think this out and see where we stand. Just what does Rudd know about Dorothy?"

"He thinks she's my girl friend," said Smooth and grinned broadly.

"You see—he's not so *very* clever," said Dorothy.

"That's what you think. However, he wanted me to take you over to Spanish's place tonight."

"Oh, he did, eh?" she said. "But you preferred a blonde?"

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"Naturally! Spanish thinks that Rudd goes for you—you know that. I had a tough job getting you out of there once and I'd be an awful sap to walk you into the place again."

"Probably you're right," she said. "Besides, I'm sure you had a much better time with Gilda."

"Stop it, both of you!" said McNeary. "I think Dorothy's idea is good. If Rudd imagines that she is fond of you and he trusts you—she is just the agent to put on this case. Why not have her meet Rudd? Ask him to keep an eye on her while you're away."

"It's a long shot, Chief," said Smooth. "And how about her appointment—did that come through from the Treasury Department?"

"I'll take care of all that. If Dorothy wants to go through with this, you help her. And that's an order."

"Are you *quite* satisfied, Mr. Kyle?" asked Dorothy.

"*Quite,* Miss Manning," said Smooth shortly. "If you will find your hat and gloves we'll get started. I've got to report to Rudd, and this is the only opportunity I'll have to introduce you."

Dorothy gathered her things together, smiled knowingly at McNeary and crossed to the door. The Chief patted Smooth upon the back and pushed him gently toward her.

"Good-by, kids," he said. "Lots of luck. And keep in touch with me, Smooth—report every day if you can."

CHAPTER XIII.

OFF TO LOS ANGELES.

SMOOTH escorted Dorothy to the elevator and jabbed petulantly at the button. He was not at all pleased with this sudden turn of affairs. It was all very well for him to take chances—that was his trade. And when McNeary ordered him to a dangerous assignment it was to be expected as part of the routine of a Treasury Agent. Of course, it was true that women had done some splendid work in the bureau. Smooth knew of cases that had been broken in record time through the efforts of these tireless and efficient operators. But to him, these women had only been names—cogs in a huge machine of which he too was an infinitesimal part. Dorothy was different—she was an entity, and a very particular part of his scheme of things.

He said little during their trip across town and ordered the driver of their cab to stop two blocks distant from Rudd's apartment. He turned up the front window of the car, glanced about to be sure that no loiterers were paying too much attention to the parked taxi, and proceeded to rehearse Dorothy in the most important part she had ever played.

It was only logical to suppose that Rudd would question her at some time in the near future as to her relationship with Smooth. He outlined a plausible story of their meeting and of the time that followed. There was a span of a few years left open, and about this Dorothy was to be reticent.

She could hint that Smooth may have been in jail, but of necessity she must be vague.

When he was satisfied that she was thoroughly conversant with the manufactured history he opened the cab door and was about to help her to the street.

"No, that won't do!" he said abruptly. "You wait here and I'll come for you in a little while."

"But I don't understand," she said. "Why can't I come along now?"

"I'm not sure myself. But I've got a

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hunch—oh, I can't just explain it—but stay put! I'll be back."

He closed the door and walked quickly to the elaborate building that Rudd made his home. He was admitted by Simpson, the butler, who had grown two droopy bags beneath his eyes during the course of his night's wakefulness.

"Ah, yes," said Simpson. "Mr. Rudd's been waiting up for you."

Smooth found Rudd seated behind the Queen Anne desk in the library. He was immaculate as ever and showed little signs of weariness. His waxlike fingers were drumming their incessant tattoo on the polished surface of the desk, and his eyes, when they met Smooth's, were beady and bright.

"I was a little worried about you," he said. "As a matter of fact I was about to send some of the boys over to help you get out of the Trocado."

"Thanks," said Smooth. "I generally manage to dig out of the tough spots. I hear you gave Spanish's mob a warm reception when they came visiting."

"They never did finish their visit, thanks to you. That was a nice piece of work, Smooth, and I won't forget it," Rudd said.

"It wasn't so hard. Gilda deserves more credit than I do—she's an ace."

"She told me about that little act you put on at the club. And in spite of your cave-man tactics she seems to think you're just right." He pointed to the decanter. "Want a drink?"

Smooth poured himself a glass of rye and was about to raise it to his lips when he became aware of a subtle odor. For a moment it remained an elusive fragrance that refused to place itself in any definite category. It was strong, heady and fresh in his mind. Realization brought a smile to his lips. Gilda Garland! That was it! She must have been in this room within the past few moments.

THAT hunch of his had been right. In all probability Gilda was still in the apartment, and it would have been folly to bring Dorothy Manning along with him. There was no doubt in Smooth's mind as to Gilda's cleverness. Dorothy might be a match for her, but Smooth was glad he had prevented a meeting. Things were tough enough without it.

"I'm glad Gilda likes me," he said. "Where is she now?"

"Interested, eh?"

"Why not? A man should be interested in his own wife."

"Well of all the—"

Smooth turned quickly at the words. Gilda was standing in the doorway, hands on her hips and a cigarette drooping from the corner of her mouth. She was eying him with an expression of indignant amusement.

"Hello, Beautiful," he said. "Where did you come from?"

"Never mind that," she snapped. "What's all this guff about me being your wife?"

"Oh, don't take it seriously—it's a gag. Big Spanish wants me to go to the coast today and take you with me as my wife."

"Spit it out, Smooth!" said Rudd. "What's it all about?"

"Nothin' much to it. Spanish has been losing a lot of men here in New York. He's calling the boys in from the sticks and hired me to take the place of one of his oldtimers. I'm to report to a guy by the name of Ed Jordan in L. A. and take orders from him. Spanish says the job is legit, but I gotta hunch I'll be hustling junk across the line."

Rudd stared thoughtfully at the

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desk top. His fingers drummed lightly and his lips were thin. At length he nodded wisely and pointed a parchment-like finger at Gilda. "It looks as though you're going to earn another diamond, my dear," he said. "I can understand why Spanish wants you to go with Smooth. You're the front—you make him a respectable married man. And it's clever—damn clever!"

"Well, I like that!" she said. "You wave a finger—and I'm Mrs. Kyle, eh?"

"Oh, don't get kittenish," said Smooth. "I don't like this any more than you do, but it's business—see? We won't have to stay more than a few days. In that time, if you use your wits as hard as I expect to use mine we'll have the lowdown on Spanish's supply. After that a word to the Feds and the chump is out of business."

"Quick thinking, Smooth," said Rudd. "When do you leave?"

"On the afternoon plane."

Rudd glanced at his watch and then to the window where the morning sun was making an intricate light pattern on the drapes. There was satisfaction in the look he directed at Gilda.

"Go home and get packed, my dear," he said. "Meet Smooth at the airport in time to catch that plane. I promise you won't regret it."

"I'm inclined to believe I'll enjoy it," she said, and lifted an ironic eyebrow at Smooth as she left the room.

WHEN she had gone, Smooth leaned across the desk as though he were about to impart a confidence.

"I'll play this through for you, Rudd," he said, "but I want you to do me a favor. My girl friend is plenty sore about me dancing off with a blonde. And, to make things worse, Spanish would give his right eye to get rid of her for keeps! I'm not any too happy about going to the coast and leaving her here without someone to take care of her, so I'm asking you to do that little thing for me."

"Why not?" said Rudd pleasantly. "If she's the little girl who put Eddie Malloy on the spot for me, I owe her a great deal. Of course I'll keep an eye on her—where is she?"

"Waiting for me in a hack downstairs. I didn't want her to bump into Gilda and I was afraid that dame might still be hanging around here."

"Smart boy," laughed Rudd. "Go and get her."

Smooth left the apartment and hurried along the street to the waiting taxi. He paid off the driver and extended his arm to Dorothy. Madison Avenue was awakening from its night's sleep and preparing for the business of the day. Busses rolled swiftly past them, an occasional truck rumbled from one of the side streets and clattered across the car tracks, and as Smooth and Dorothy turned in beneath the marquee of the apartment a group of children romped noisily past on their way to school.

Rudd came from behind his desk when they entered the library and crossed the room with both hands outstretched to Dorothy. He lifted hers, held them and looked steadily into her eyes and Smooth was again conscious of the magnetic personality this gambler could exert when he chose. The man was suavity in itself—a cultured gentleman whose charm was irresistible.

"So this is Miss Manning?" said Rudd. "Smooth hardly did you justice in his description. You're beautiful, my dear—beautiful! And it's going to be a positive pleasure to be associated with you. I might even hope that

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Smooth will be forced to stay away more than the few days he expects."

His tone was light, flattering, and Smooth saw that Dorothy was wholly unprepared to meet a man of this caliber. Big Spanish and his mob were the direct opposites of this smiling gambler and they were the type she had expected. But Dorothy was an actress—it simply meant playing a different rôle, and she was quick to accept her cue.

"I'll miss Smooth," she said, and when she spoke Smooth wished that she were not acting. "And I'm depending upon you to take his place."

"I can promise you," said Smooth, "that he'll be good company. And I'll feel a whole lot better knowing that he's going to keep an eye on you while I'm gone. I'd like to sit and talk for a while until you two become better acquainted, but I've got to get my things together so I can grab that plane. If you don't mind, I'll run along."

He extended his left hand to Rudd, and the gambler caught it in both of his and shook it warmly. He winked to Dorothy and started for the door, but stopped when he heard her utter a startled exclamation.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Smooth! You're not going to kiss me before you go?"

He grinned. Dorothy was proving herself to be the perfect actress. In fact she was doing a better job than he was. Again he realized that an agent in the Bureau of Narcotics was entitled to any breaks that might come his way in the performance of his duty. This was a break—and he made the most of it.

He stepped beside her, held her closely to him with one arm and kissed her emphatically—not once, but three times. Her eyes were wide as she lifted her mouth to his, and Smooth thought he detected a trace of laughter within them. He withdrew his arm from about her waist and looked at her steadily for a moment.

To his surprise, she pulled his head down and kissed him again, then walked hurriedly to a window and stood staring down into the street.

GILDA was pacing nervously about the waiting room when Smooth arrived at the Newark airport. He stood near the door and watched her for a moment, and he decided he might enjoy this trip to the coast even more than he expected. She was smartly dressed in a tight-fitting gray tailored suit. Her platinum curls were crisp and fresh beneath a snug gray fedora. Smooth noticed her eyes were a trifle tired, but there was a springiness in her walk that made him wonder where she had summoned up such energy after a sleepless night.

When she caught sight of him she gave a little gesture of impatience and waved for him to hurry. He glanced at the clock and saw it was within a few moments of starting time and his bags had not yet been weighed in.

"Got the tickets?" he asked.

"Of course I have," she answered. "I've been here a half hour and I suppose you've been catching up on your sleep. You men are all alike—you need nurses. C'mon, let's get started."

She handed him the tickets and he picked up his bags when they had been okayed by the weigher. As they walked to the plane, the blast from the propellers whipped Gilda's skirt madly about her ankles. Smooth saw his fellow passengers grinning approvingly from the windows and realized he would not be called upon to provide all of the entertainment on the cross-country hop.

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The plane rolled down field, swung and strained against the brakes as the pilot tested the motors. There was a smooth run past the airport buildings and they lifted easily from the ground. Smooth looked out of the window and saw a flutter of handkerchiefs from the people at the airport. He heard the man in the seat behind him calling good-byes that could not possibly carry to his friends below. As the ship roared off into the afternoon sky he wondered if Dorothy Manning had only been acting when she gave him that last kiss.

He settled in his chair and decided to sleep through the first leg of the journey. A dig in the ribs settled that.

"Now what?" he asked, and turned to face Gilda, who was leaning from her chair across the aisle.

"Darling," she purred, "do you *have* to behave like a husband? After all—we've been married such a short time I should think you might show a little interest in your bride. Tell me where we're going to live—and why. And do you suppose Miss Manning will miss you?"

"Angel," he answered thinly, "how would you like to go to hell?"

"Oh, come on, Smooth—be a sport! This little joyride may wind up in a coroner's office. We're both in a tough spot, and I, for one, don't see why we have to make it tougher by fighting our way to California. Be nice! Smile for your bride—and see if you can dig up a piece of chewing gum."

Smooth handed her a package, twisted around in his chair and nodded.

"You win," he said. "But remember this—we're both working for Rudd. This isn't a joyride and we've got a fast job of work to put across. I don't know what we're going to bump into when we hit L. A., and I don't care much. I'm depending upon you to play smart and use those blue eyes of yours to get me any information that I can't. As for the bride stuff—nuts! You're poison, Beautiful—a guy in my racket can't afford to fall for a dame like you. And, believe me, Gorgeous, I don't intend to!"

Gilda laughed and twisted the gum wrapper into a tight wad, then flipped it into Smooth's face.

"Flatterer!" she whispered. "You're too good-looking to stay in circulation—watch what little Gilda can do when she makes up her mind. And now we've settled that, go on back to sleep. I'll look over the peasants in this crate and see if I can find one who'll keep a girl from being bored to death."

At Kansas City, when the plane drifted down from the night sky, Smooth saw that Gilda had dropped off to sleep. He hurried to the telegraph office and sent a wire to McNeary confirming his departure, and in it he asked the Chief to keep Dorothy out of trouble, if possible. There was time for a quick cup of coffee and then the huge air-liner was up and sliding along the dark airways again.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

A Hard-Working Hound

A DOG built much like a dachshund was in common use a hundred years ago in England to turn roasting spits before the fire. He was put into a box fitted with a paddle wheel which he worked with his forefeet. Such a dog was called a turnspit, or sometimes a bath hound.

—*Delos White.*

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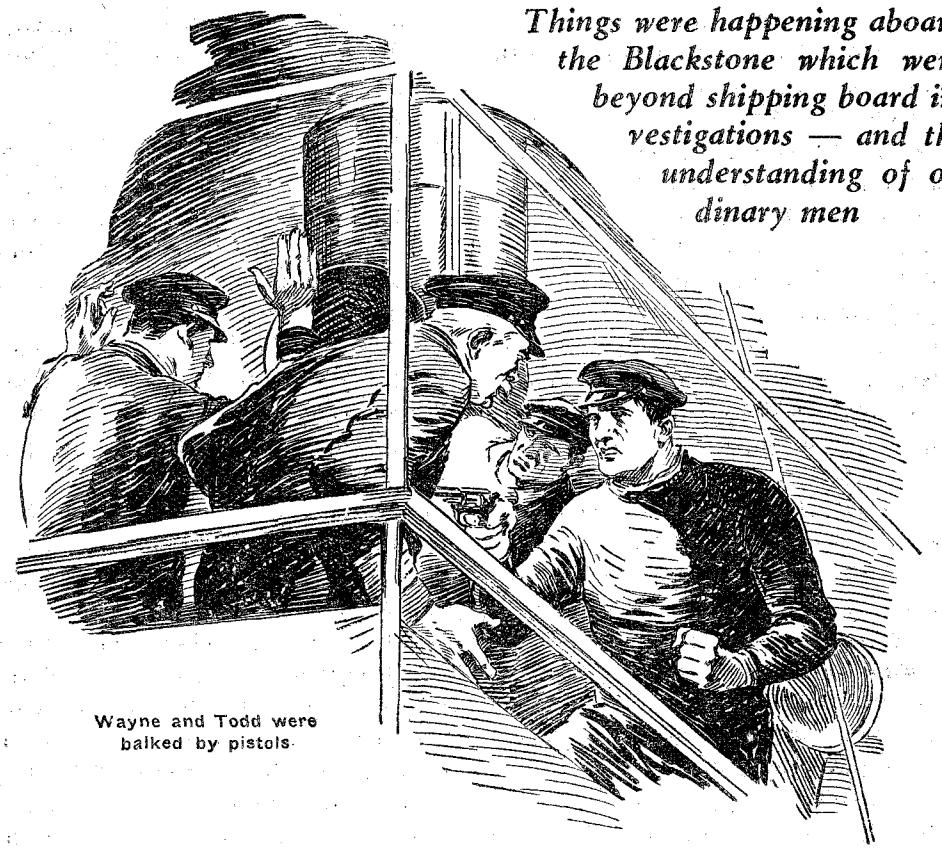
Things were happening aboard the Blackstone which were beyond shipping board investigations — and the understanding of ordinary men



Wayne and Todd were balked by pistols

Thunder Deck

By R. V. GERY

IT was in Havana it started, twenty —let's see—twenty-four years ago. Away before the war, and I was on my second ship, a raw young whelp of a deck-hand. The Blackstone, she was, and a fine old Lloyd's delight, by jiminy—one o' them rusty, rickety tubs you used to find them days, cargo-snuppin' about the ports. Bit here an' bit there, general stuff; anything at all to fill up space, an' then away to the next one. She'd been muckin' round the West Indies for a month or better, and now she was pretty well full up with her usual box o' tricks, and headed east, for this very spot we're in now—Cadiz first, and then the Mediterranean, if she ever got there, which looked plenty of a toss-up, to judge by her general layout.

Wayne was her master's name, an' he wasn't any better found than she was herself. Fat old boy with a walrus mustache and an eye like a dead codfish; ought to've been ashore long ago, but hangin' on the way some o' these jeremydiddlers do. Pretty useless—an' the rest of 'em weren't no better. Morgan and Todd, the first and second mates, and Taggart, the engineer—poor stuff, I'd say now, officerin' a vessel on her

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last legs. An' she'd a crew o' scamps and sweepin's that'd fair make you cry. Oh, she was a beauty, the Blackstone—no end of a beauty, believe you me!

Well, she was in Havana harbor, ready for sea—an' I'd been up in the town, explorin' like a youngster will. In them days Havana wasn't what it is now; they didn't have world-cruisers and see-it-while-you-wait ships in and out every twenty minutes like now. Havana was just a plain seaport, an' a feller could hit the beach without bein' got up like a comic op'ra admiral, if you get me.

I'd been nosin' into all manner o' places, some of 'em where a pup of nineteen didn't have any business—an' round midnight I was goin' down one o' the streets leadin' to the water. It was dark as the inside of a cow, excep' for a light now an' then from a window, and I dare say I wasn't none too steady on me pins. Anyhow, about 'arf-way down the street there's a fire-an'-brimstone burst o' Spanish, right under me nose. Seemed I'd took liberties with someone, although I'll pass you me word I never felt a thing.

"Oh!" I says. "Sorry, mister—no offense meant, I'm sure!"

THERE wasn't any answer for a minute. I could just see the bloke, kind o' dim in the queer light. He'd pulled away a step or two an' was lookin' at me.

"*Ingles?*" he says then, in a funny cracked kind of a voice.

"English, yes," says I. "And I'm sorry, whoever you are. Wasn't lookin' where I was goin', I reckon—"

He comes closer—a rum-lookin' little cove, with a wisp o' beard on his chin, an' from what I could make of him a mighty pale face.

"Your sheep—yonder—" he says, talkin' English; a sort of English, that is. "Black-a-ston', eh?"

Well, it seemed to me it wasn't any of his business, maybe; but somehow or other I heard meself answerin' him.

"Yes," I says. "The Blackstone it is, mister. Anything I c'n do for you?"

AGAIN he didn't say a word for a minute, and I could've almost sworn he'd drifted back against the wall—it was as dark as that there. But no; when he spoke he was close to me. Too close, in fact. I jumped a bit.

"It is—Cadiz she sail for?" he said, almost whisperin', but still in that sing-song English of his. He was excited, too, I could tell by his tone. If I'd been able to see him, he'd have been pretty near dancin' with excitement, I'd have said.

"Well—yes," says I. "Cadiz it is, mister. Why? Lookin' for a berth?"

Well, b'lieve me or b'lieve me not, he never said a word. Not a sound out of him, and the black patch where he'd been looked blacker than ever all at once.

"Hey-y—" I said.

And then I got a proper jolt, for a pub door across the road swung open, an' a shaft o' yellow light shone out. It hit the wall, smack where the little feller had been. He wasn't there. He'd hopped it—skipped out—bolted.

"Well, blow me down!" I says, standin' there scratchin' me head like a silly fool, I make no doubt. "What kind o' jumpin'-jack show's all that? Might've said thankye, anyway!"

And with that I walked on, lookin' pretty hard all round me to see if I could spot him anywhere about. He'd made me curious, that little codger had, with his questions and his goin'-goin'-gone business. Curious, yes, an' a mite

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scared, too. It didn't render, somehow—'twasn't the kind o' thing a nineteen-year-old deck-hand expected to run up against, not at all. I'd been thinkin' the Blackstone was the world's worst bet as a ship, but I don't mind admittin' I was glad to see her boat all the same.

Morris, the bos'n, was in charge of her. "Come on, come on, there!" he says, mighty crusty. "Can't hang round 'arf the night waiting for you, young feller. Shove off," he says, "an' look lively about it, d'ye hear? I'm in a hurry."

It wasn't more'n a couple o' hundred yards to the Blackstone. Half-way out, Morris at the tiller leans forward all at once.

"Who's that forward there?" he says. "Thought there was only two of you."

Well, so there was only two of us—another hand called Jenks, and me. I was pullin' stroke, an' took a look over me shoulder. So did Jenks.

"There's no one there, sir," I says.

Nor there was—not a soul. The bos'n rubs his fat eyes.

"Rummy!" says he. "Could 'a' sworn I see someone—"

With that we made the Blackstone an' went aboard. Top o' the ladder, Todd, the second officer, was waitin' for us. He draws the bos'n aside, out of our hearin', and for a minute they stand talkin' under the electric. Then Morris nods.

"Very good, sir!" I can hear him say. "I'll keep me eyes skinned."

"You better," says the mate, and moves away. Morris comes over to me.

"See here, young 'un!" he says. "You're a level-headed kid, an' too good to be mixed up with that riff-raff forward there. I'm warnin' you, see? Don't you get your fingers into nobody else's business, these times. And if you 'ear," he says, "anything up there that isn't just accordin' to Hoyle, why, you'll be doin' yourself no manner o' harm in lettin' me know."

AND he goes stumpin' off aft, leavin' me gapin' after him.

"Crimes!" I says. "What's all this? Smells a whole lot like trouble, feller. Better go careful—"

Come to think of it, it didn't look any too healthy, this whisperin', behind-the-hand stuff—not with what we'd got in the Blackstone's fo'c's'le. Morris had been right about them, anyway. They weren't any mob to go foolin' with, them boys. I wasn't more than a kid meself, as the bos'n had said, but that stuck out a yard, right enough.

So I went forward kind o' quiet like, an' wonderin'. The little Dago I'd seen on shore had slipped me memory, and I was all took up with this other doings. And sure as eggs, I'd not stuck me nose inside that fo'c's'le before I knew somethin' was up.

Anyone who's been at sea, even for the little bit I had in them times, can tell you the same thing—there's a kind o' screwed-up, excited feelin' about a fo'c's'le where there's trouble brewin'. Bridge is different, an' so's engine room, by all accounts—anyway, I've seen 'em both go on, weeks at a time, with murder itchin' in their fingers an' faces like plaster saints. But it don't work that way in a fo'c's'le. Seems like what's there's got to come out, an' that's why there ain't many mutinies that ever amounts to anything. Someone gives 'em away.

That's what it was like here. It was gone one in the mornin', and the freighter was due to pull out on the early tide, so by rights the hands should have been catchin' a slice o' shut-eye.

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But they were all awake, in their bunks, an' growlin' to themselves.

They stopped when I come in, and one of 'em—Marks his name was, a London River particular, an' if they come worse I'll trouble you to show me 'em—speaks up.

"'Ullo, 'ullo!" he says, squintin' at me. "'Ere's the hinfant wonder, boys. Been up in the town, no doubt, 'obnobbin' wiv 'is posh pals. Ain't goin' to stay in no fo'c's'le long, 'e ain't, gents. *Mister* Charteris, it's to be, when we scoffs that mate's ticket we're so bloomin' set on—"

He was askin' for a row, it looked to me, an' there was a kind of a murmur from the other bunks in the dark. All the same, I wasn't havin' any—not after what I'd heard; so I laughed.

"You shove a sock in it, Charlie!" I says. "What's the matter? Somethin' eatin' you?"

He let go with string o' stuff then that ain't worth tryin' to repeat, an' I believe he'd have gone for me—with a knife as like as not—if it hadn't been for another of 'em. This chap was a big lump of a Swede called Lundborg, an' he'd been in trouble with the bos'n and the bridge all trip. Dangerous swine, but now he was all butter.

"Lat him be, Sharlie!" he says. "Tomorrow, maybe, I talk to him a liddle, yaw!"

AN' he gives a kind of a giggle, as if he's thinkin' o' somethin' funny.

"What's up?" I says, innocent as you please.

"Up?" says he. "Why, nodings, liddle man—nodings at all. Choost a fonny choke from Sharlie. Sleep now—und in der morning Kris tell you all apout it. Oh, yaw, all apout it!"

Well, that was enough for me, and it'd have been enough for a blind man, I guess. They'd got somethin' up their sleeves, this lot. I turned in, but you c'n bet your life I wasn't doin' any sleepin', not with Marks an' Lundborg on the job. I yanked out a clasp-knife an' hung on to that, sweatin'. It wasn't any fun, neither. I was scared.

All the same, nothin' happened—nothin' at all, and at daylight the bos'n tumbles the whole boilin' of us out, as per usual. To see them rummies jumpin' to orders an' hustlin' round gettin' the Blackstone to sea was a caution.

It'd have been funny if it hadn't been so bloomin' serious, if you get me. They'd it all planned out, sure enough—wait till we were out o' soundings an' then try somethin'. But till then it was goin' to be all fair weather, an' everybody movin' at the word.

"Yes," I says to meself, "you would, wouldn't you? Well, let's wait an' see, that's all, me fine buckaroos!"

Wait an' see it was, for we'd not been at sea a day when somethin' else turned up that made the lot of us look an' scratch our heads. We'd a stowaway aboard, it seemed like—an' yet there wasn't anything o' the usual about this chap. Matter o' fact, he was—Well, he was disturbin'. That's the word; disturbin'. Just plain upsettin' in his little ways.

First off, here comes Morris the bos'n, rampagin' into the fo'c's'le like a cat in the measles.

"Which o' you crimson sons o' this-an'-that," he inquires, very savage, "was muckin' around my berth last night?"

Nobody says anything, but we just stared at each other. I reckon the murder gang was figurin' out which of their own lot had been tempted beyond his strength, as you might say, an' gone explorin' prematoor, with a gully-knife. But there's not a word out of anyone,

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excep' that Marks, and he's got to have his little bit o' sauce, naturally.

"Why, bose," says he, sourcastic, "'ow could you? Surely you ain't accusin' us o' breakin' your 'allowed slumbers?"

"You stow it!" Morris says. "Come on, now, which o' you was it? It was one o' you all right, for I seen—hey, what the devil!" He stops, glarin' at one o' the hands, a little cove what was tryin' to sprout a set o' whiskers on his silly chin. "You, Mullins! You're the feller! What d'ye mean by it, eh?"

AND with that he goes to make a pass at him, but Mullins ducks.

"Whatcher talkin' about?" he says. "'Twasn't me."

"You're a blinkin' liar," says the bos'n.

"I ain't, then," says Mullins. "I was in that there berth all last night, with the stummick-ache. These chaps here'll tell you—an' the cook, 'e was doctorin' me."

Well, there wasn't any gettin' round that. Morris called the cook an' checked up, and it was true. Mullins hadn't been out o' Barbecue's sight all night. All the same, Morris didn't believe him. He scowls very bitter.

"It *was* you," he says. "Couldn't 'ave been no one else—there ain't no one on this hooker that's got a bloomin' market-garden on his puss but you. You're lyin', the whole bunch o' you, but I can't pin it on you. Just you wait, though—I'll 'ave you yet!"

And he stamps off. Marks looks round and grins.

"Well?" he says. "Any gent got any remarks to myke on that little bit o' stuff?"

At that they all began talkin' at once, gabblin' and whisperin' as usual, an' chewin' the fat. But I didn't say nothin' at all. I was thinkin'. I'd remembered all at once that rum little stick in Havana, an' what the bos'n had seen—or thought he'd seen—in that boat comin' out to the Blackstone. I was wonderin'; but if you'd asked me what I was wonderin', I'm blowed if I could 'a' told you meself. Only, it was queer—almighty queer.

And that night it was queerer still. About two bells in the mornin' watch, I was on the wheel. Morgan, the first, was in charge, an' the old ship was lollopin' along, rumblety-bump-clank, into the east, when here comes a devil's own delight of a yellyhooin' from the skipper's cabin.

"'Strewth!" says Morgan, an' jumps. "What's that?"

Well, we hadn't long to wait to find out, for the next news is old Wayne himself in his nightgown, his eyes startin' out of his head.

"What in th-thunder's all this?" he storms. "What kind of a watch you keepin' here, mister? Someone's been in my cabin—"

Morgan stares at him. "In your cabin, sir?" he asks, hesitatin' like.

"Yes, damme!" says the skipper. "In my cabin, if you please. A nasty little feller with a beard. I saw him, in the light from the porthole!"

Morgan strokes his chin. I dunno whether the bos'n had been talkin' or not, but he'd got the idea all right.

"Just a minute, sir," he says. "We'll have Morris up, and figure this out. One o' the hands, maybe, walkin' in his sleep. Charteris," he says to me, "give me that wheel a minute and go down and fetch the bos'n."

WELL, I did, but I wasn't quite sure whether I was walkin' on me head or me heels as the sayin' is. This bloomin' business was gettin'

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beyond a joke, it looked to me. All the same, it wasn't for me to say anything, o' course. What was there to say, anyhow?

So I went down and routed Morris out, and I'll trouble you to imagine the kind o' humor he was in. Takin' it by an' large, there wasn't much he didn't say about skippers seein' things an' so on. But he tumbled out, all the same, an' went on deck, where the skipper was foamin' at the mouth by now, huddled up in an old pea-coat.

"Turn the hands out!" he splutters. "I want to see the son of a soldier that's been trespassin' on my privacy! I'll—I'll skin him alive, by James!"

So the bos'n turns 'em out, an' naturally it don't do Mullins no manner o' good to say he was asleep an' dreamin'. It all comes out about the bos'n the night before, an' the upshot is Mullins is took an' clapped in irons as a lyin', twistin' hound, an' a dangerous feller to be at large, an' a few other things that occurred to the skipper.

"Yes," he says, as Mullins is led away to clink, "and if anyone else wants any more of it, he knows where to come. I ain't afraid of a parcel o' dock-sweepin's, so don't you think it, any of you!"

And he stamps out, same as Morris had night before. He was a weak, blitherin' old fool, an' that mob had got him sized up all right. He wasn't out o' the fo'c's'le, hardly, when Lundborg, the Swede, an' Marks, an' the rest o' the crowd got into a huddle over in a corner, talkin' under their breaths an' carryin' on in a way I could not understand the proper meanin' of, just then.

By an' by Marks looks over at me. "'Ow about little Percy?" he says out o' the edge of his mouth. "Is 'e playin' this 'ere gyme, or 'as 'e got to be attended to first. If it's a bit o' fixin' 'e wants," he says, with a leer at me that'd have turned you seasick, "why, I don't mind obligin' the comp'ny," he says, "an' slittin' 'is little goozle while you wait!"

Now that wasn't any pretty hearin' for a youngster up against his first slab o' trouble—specially as Marks hauls out that knife of his an' comes across the floor, all hunched like a fightin' cat, an' glowerin' very horrid to see. I backed into the wall an' fumbled for me own knife—not that it'd have been worth a rap against Marks, but somethin' had to be done. This dilly-dilly-duck business didn't suit me at all.

"Stand back, Marks!" I says. "Or I'll cut your heart out!"

Must have sounded funny enough, too, from a nineteen-year-old green boy. Anyway, it got a laugh, and Lundborg reached out and caught Marks by the shoulder.

"Shtop it!" he said. "Haf I not toldt you I would dell him all apout it? Yaw. Leaf him be, I say. Boy, gome here!"

Well, I went. There wasn't anything else to do. That bunch would 'a' slit my goozle, just as Marks said, for tuppence an' thought nothin' about it. It ain't often trouble starts with a gang o' their kind, but when it does it flares up quick. They'd mutinied then and there, right now. And young Henry Charteris wasn't the man to stop 'em.

SO I let Lundborg take me by the arm an' draw me over to him. He was grinnin' all over his big ugly face an' showin' a row of yellow teeth like tombstones.

"Do nodt pe afraid!" he says. "Marks, he iss only trying you out, boy! You are all righdt, no? You do nodt desert your friendts?"

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"I don't know what you mean," I says to him, sparrin' for time, kind o' desperate. "But if it's mutiny you fellers are on, count me out, that's all. I'll have nothin' to do with it!"

Marks snarls like a wolf. "There you are!" he says. "Cut 'is ruddy throat, Kris, an' let's get on with it!"

There was a growl from the rest of 'em that made me say me prayers, but Lundborg never took no notice of it.

"Yaw!" he says, sneerin'. "Und lose der only man here dot knows navigation, eh? How ofden musdt I tell you, Marks? He iss pretty near a mate alretty, no? He sails der ship for us—"

"Damned if I do!" says I.

But Lundborg don't take no manner o' notice o' that either. He catches hold o' me sudden round the arms in a grip like a bear's.

"A rope!" he grunts. "We tie him, at least—und afterwards, maybe we talk again. Now, we do nodt waste time on such liddle boys!"

So they lashed me up in a bundle an' dumped me on the floor in a corner. Marks and Lundborg started in, drillin' the rest in the dark. I heard it all, an' believe me it wasn't so nice. They'd guns, some of 'em, and they were goin' to use 'em, too. It looked wicked bad for old Wayne an' the rest o' them aft there, unless the bos'n had his ears skinned.

Well, they went out then—slippin' away one by one. The Blackstone wasn't one o' these modern affairs with electrics in every corner and the whole ship under the eye o' the bridge, as you might say. There was plenty o' shadow under the rail and so on, and anyhow the night was as dark as ink—just the kind o' thing for the rush these devils were plannin'.

They left me in the dark, with plenty to think about, too. I'd heard tell o' this sort o' bobbery before—mutiny, I mean—but I'd not expected to run across it in the raw so soon, naturally.

IT was too much of a bally puzzler to stick a nineteen-year-old's nose up against, and I'm free to admit I was pretty near cryin', what with one thing and another, when all of a sudden I turned me head, lyin' there, an' mighty near chucked a fit on the spot.

There was a little man standin' in the middle of the fo'c's'le floor, lookin' at me, and I didn't need to be told twice who he was. It was the same little cuss that had run into me in Havana—beard, white face, and all. But now I could see him a whole lot clearer, because he was in the light. Kind of a glimmer, it was, comin' from Lord knows where, and I didn't inquire just then, but it made him stand out against the dark like a banana in a coal-cellar.

"Ker-rimes!" I says.

He don't say nothin' at all, only comes movin' forward, and I could see his eyes glitterin' under his shaggy eyebrows. Middle-aged little chap, or more—he'd gray in his hair an' beard, I saw—an' dressed in some kind of outlandish kit I'd not run across the like of previous.

He give me the shivers, all at once. Didn't look nach'ral to me—

An' then, by the Lord, I'd somethin' else to chew on. He knelt by me an' began untyin' the lashin's the Swede had fixed up. A proper seaman he was, at that—there was nothin' in them knots that stopped him, not for a minute. But so help me Susannah, the flesh on me began to creep, an' the hair stood upon the nape o' my neck, because I couldn't feel no fingers.

When whoever-it-was had done loosenin' me, he stood back.

"Rise, *señor!*" he said in that queer,

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sing-song voice of his. "There is mutiny here, no?"

"Looks damned like it!" I said. "But—'oo are you, an' what are you doin' here?"

He made a kind of a wash-out movement with one hand, as if he was shovin' me aside.

"Mutiny, hah?" he said under his breath, and then went off into a string of Spanish fireworks that sounded like tearin' calico. "Mutiny! It seems, *Señor Ingles,* that I have seen some such matter before. Come!"

BELIEVE it or not, that little feller was spittin' like a cat with pure temper, and there was somethin' about him that had me on me feet right away. You know how it is—there's some men it don't do to shilly-shally with. Well, this cove was one of them; oh, by crimes, yes, he was one of them.

So I followed him to the door, an' together we peered out aft, along the Blackstone's decks. What we saw didn't improve my state o' mind none, I'm tellin' you.

The moon was up now, and from where we were the bridge was visible, clear as day. There were a dozen of 'em on it, in and out o' the chartroom, mighty busy with some monkey-work or other of their own. In a wing of the bridge, pushed against the outside edge of it, I could see a couple o' figures that were old Wayne, unless I was mistook, an' Todd, the second officer. Morgan, the first, wasn't there, nor the bos'n neither, and it didn't need more'n a couple o' guesses to figure out what'd prob'bly happened to them, pore fellers.

A couple o' the mutineers was holdin' Wayne and Todd where they was with pistols. You could see 'em plain.

"Hah-h!" says the little chap again, a kind o' hiss like a snake.

And then he stops, sudden. Another pair o' the beauties up there have come tumblin' down the ladder, hurryin' forward. It's me they're after, o' course—one of 'em's Lundborg, by the size of him. I pulled back into the shadow, and the little man grunts.

"So!" he says.

With that, here's somethin' slid into me hand—about two foot or so of an iron bar they used for leverin' hatches.

I hefted it, there in the shadow, and His Nibs grinned at me right across his queer, nutcracker mug. Then he—well, he went away, if that's what it was. At any rate, he wasn't there any more. I waited for Lundborg and Co. feelin' more than a little sick, I do assure you.

Right along they came, and I could hear Lundborg growlin' in that hoarse, animal fashion of his. The other man with him says somethin', and Lundborg laughs.

"Oho!" says he. "Dot will be all righdt, do nodt worry. He does as he is toldt, or else—" *Whack!*

Right as he passed me I got him—plunk on the skull, with a noise I can hear yet, like breakin' eggshells. Down he went, limp as a dead dog, an' by the time Number Two'd made up his mind somethin' was happenin', I'd give him what stopped him thinkin' for a bit, too.

"Aha!" says Kiss-Me-Quick, right at me elbow, an' where he'd come from mebbe you know, for I don't. "It is so we deal with dogs, eh, *Señor Ingles?*"

"Yes," I says, pickin' up Lundborg's gun. "An' now we'll just have a look at some o' the other dogs, mister, an' see if there's a yap or so left in them still. Come on!"

I'D given over wonderin' who he was or what he was. All I wanted was to get at that bridge, single-handed, or with him as me sidekick, an' blow

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hell out of Marks and his bunch. But no—the little feller wasn't havin' any. He looks at the pistol, curious.

"No," he said. "Not so, *amigo*—not yet. They are many to one, still, with such affairs. And there is also the captain and his mate—if these children of the devil are alarmed, they will certainly kill these. No, there is another way, *hijo mio!*"

Well, he was talking sense all right—and it's odd, but I'd lost that scare of him I had. I wasn't any nearer havin' a notion who he was or what he was doin', but I could talk back to him without swallowin'.

"Yes?" I says. "Let's hear it."

He poked his head out of the door again, and I took another squint. Things up there on the bridge was pretty much as they were, but naturally it wasn't goin' to be more than a brace o' shakes before Marks and Co. were askin' questions about Lundborg and me. Wayne and Todd were still huddled in the wing, cowed by the guns pulled on 'em.

"Go ahead!" I says to the little man. "Your move, guv'nor!"

Well, at that he don't say nothing—only stood there, tuggin' at that beard of his and frownin'. I could see him clearer now, though even that wasn't anything very clear. Kind of shimmery about the edges still, if you get what I mean. But there was enough of him to recognize again if I saw him.

Then he makes up his mind, an' out he goes on that deck, large as life, an' starts walkin' straight for the bridge. The moon shone on him, or all round him, but you know the way things are in that kind o' light. It wasn't easy to be sure of anything, once he'd got ten yards away—but I could have took my oath he'd somethin' in his hand now, somethin' long an' glitterin'.

"Here!" I says to meself. "This'll never do. Can't leave him to face that mob alone."

So out I goes, too, but you c'n just bet I'm not doin' any paradin' across the open deck like him. I don't mind ownin' I got down on me hands and knees, an' went belly-fashion, dodgin' from shadow to shadow. That bridge up there was too almighty high an' towerin' to please me.

There wasn't a roach could move on the foredeck without a man at that rail spottin' it.

But d'ye know somethin'? That crowd never saw the little feller until he was actually goin' up the ladder! Why, I don't know, for there was a dozen of 'em in plain sight on the bridge there; but none of 'em seemed to look forward at all, until Marks comes to the rail. I reckon he was gettin' curious about Lundborg.

Well, he sees the little chap, not a dozen feet from him.

"Gawd!" he yells sudden. "'Oo the 'ell's this—"

AN' with that up with his *bundook* an' lets go, once, twice, an' then again. Seemin'ly he missed—anyway the bullets come smack-thud into the deck, quite close enough to me to be comfortable, I pass you me word. An' there's a yell from Marks, callin' on his Maker, an' all manner o' things, an' then a chokin' cry. Somethin' comes pitchin' an' tumblin' down the ladder an' lies at the bottom, makin' a queer gurglin' noise, an' twitchin'. It's friend Marks, an' he's been stuck in the throat, same's you'd stick a pig.

"Judas!" I says. "That's goin' it pretty strong—"

Well, it was, but there wasn't any time to think o' such matters. You never heard such a perishin' hubbub as

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what's broke loose on the bridge there. Shots, shouts, curses, an' the tramplin' of feet, an' then screams. By jiminy, screams!

I went up that ladder three steps at a time, the pistol cocked in me fist, an' me heart hammerin' at me ribs like a sledge. Gawd knows what I expected to see at the top—the devil and all his fry wouldn't have surprised me. But when I put foot on the bridge, it was mostly over.

Down the rear ladder, helter-skelter, pell-mell, fallin' over one another in a torrent, went what was left o' the mutiny.

Judgin' by the sounds they was makin', somethin' had put it in their silly heads that what they'd been up to didn't pay, for they was howlin' for mercy an' forgiveness an' everything else under the sun, fit to bust.

Old Wayne had come totterin' out of the wing, and his face was like ashes.

"Why, what the— Who the . . ." he was stammerin', and not gettin' much further than that. But Todd the second had more guts, a bit. He glares at me.

"Drop that gun!" says he. "Drop it, I say!"

Thinkin', o' course, I was one o' the mob meself.

I stooped down an' picked up another, that one o' the others had chucked away.

"Here, sir!" I says. "Beggin' your pardon, but—come on!"

And with that I bolted for the after rail, an' leant over it.

"Stand fast, the lot of you!" I called down to the gang below. "We're all armed up here, an' we're takin' no more from you. Stand fast an' drop any arms you've got! Slippy, now!"

Well, they did. For a nineteen-year-old boy, bluffin'—they stuck their hands up, an' the knives and such went clatterin' on the deck. Behind me Todd was pullin' himself together.

"Beg pardon, sir," says I, turnin' to him, "but maybe you'll take over now. It don't seem altogether suitable for me to handle, somehow—"

He stares at me, passin' a hand across his brow.

"Am I mad, Charteris," he says, "or are you?"

There's a bellerin' from down the engineroom, an' Taggart, the engineer, comes tumblin' on deck. He's a drunken old Scot as a rule, but now he's sober, an' full of fight.

"Bridge!" he roars. "Are ye all richt up there? Oh, it's you, Muster Todd. Weel, an' whut kind o' whigmaleerie's this, I'd be wishful to know?"

Todd interrupts. "Never mind that now," he says. "Let's get this gang under control, and then we'll talk. Charteris, you'd better lend a hand. You seem to be in charge of the situation—you and that other fellow. Who was he—and by the great hook-block, where is he?"

He'd gone—naturally. An' what's more nobody on board the Blackstone ever clapped eyes on him again. All the way across that short-handed, cramped passage to Cadiz here, we talked about him, mostly behind our hands and without lookin' at one another. There's things at sea like that, mister—always has been an' always will be—and it don't do to go shovin' inquiries too far, if you get me. No, by thunder it don't!

Well, I suppose you want to know 'oo this little Spaniard was, eh? Well, your guess is as good's mine. I don't believe in ghosts, but—

THE END

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Bowie Knife

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Head high, and damning the consequences, Kenly rode straight into the headquarters of General Cos to meet that old devil more than halfway

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

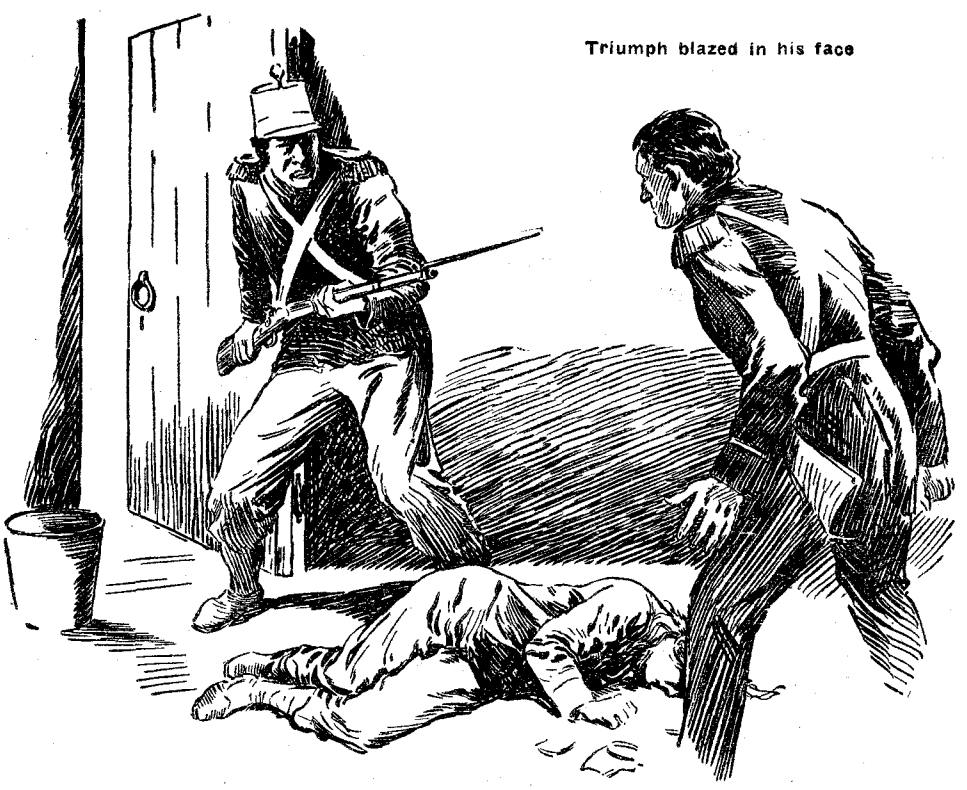
HUGH KENLY, former Mississippi River pilot, becomes embroiled with a party of roughnecks at the Hotel Beausejour in New Orleans. In 1835, this hotel was one of the most notorious hostelries in town. The ruffians had been assaulting the attractive Señorita Conchita, who was seeking a map of the famous San Saba mines of Mexico.

During the fight Kenly kills Jim Bowie, famous hombre of the frontier. Because he has killed Bowie, Kenly cannot proceed to Texas safely to help fight for her freedom.

Señorita Conchita takes Kenly to the house of Captain Rodrigo, who offers him an officership and other honors if he will fight on behalf of Mexico. So Hugh sets off on a ship with Captain Rodrigo. The ship arrives at San Blas, and Hugh and the Mexicans proceed to Goliad on the San Antonio River, the second largest fortress in Texas.

A party of Texans and Comanche Indians attack the party, but they are allowed to go on unharmed upon giving Bowie's knife (which has been in Kenly's possession ever since the brawl in the Hotel Beausejour) as a present to Red Wolf, a chief of the Comanches.

Matt Devore, a cunning trickster, proposes to Kenly that they leave immediately to strike out



Triumph blazed in his face

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for the San Saba mines. Kenly refuses and incurs Devore's enmity, who tries to kill him when they reach San Antonio. Kenly's nose is broken by the recoil of the butt of his gun during the encounter with Devore. And he is attended by Josefa, sister of the faithful Pablo.

Kenly is summoned before a tribunal composed of Santa Anna and General Cos. He is given the choice of either going to Mexico City as a prisoner or leading an expedition to the San Saba mines. Kenly chooses the latter. His small band of followers are given sufficient supplies. Among the party is Red Wolf, who attempts the abduction of Josefa. Inasmuch as Kenly holds Josefa in great affection, he makes swift pursuit after them. Josefa manages to kill Red Wolf; and she and Kenly ride on to Bejar.

Just as Kenly is trying to decide whether or not he will try to make his way out of Mexico and take Josefa with him, none other than the supposedly dead Jim Bowie makes his appearance, and confronts them!

CHAPTER X.

CONFRONTING GENERAL COS.

THE other riders had crowded forward. Jim Bowie's relentless gaze touched upon Kenly without recognition, yet attracted by the absolute stupefaction which gripped this apparent Mexican lieutenant. The eyes rested briefly, widened in startled surprise, and an oath snapped forth.

"That knife—here, hand it over! Let's look at it!"

Kenly could not move. Bowie reached forward, seized the knife, and with quick motion jerked it loose, staring at it, cursing softly.

Bowie—alive! Upon the instant, explanation of all mystery flashed through Kenly's brain. What a dupe he had been! Those others must have known it all the while. Santa Anna and Cos had lied to him that they had headquarters. Vengeance of the Veramendi family, indeed—what an absolute lie! Aimed to hold him helpless, aimed to send him to ambush and death.

"Alive!" he croaked. "Alive!"

Bowie caught the words. The blue eyes flickered up, drove at him.

"What's that? By heaven, I believe you're an American! Here, Travis, look at this fellow! Is he the one you told me about?"

Travis, the same met on the road to Goliad, urged his horse forward; sharp-faced as ever, but now with stubby reddish beard. The others, too, caught the words and came edging in, all astare at Kenly. Their voices began to bite.

"American turned Mexican! Look at him!"

"Fighting his own countrymen—give him what we gave the rest of 'em yonder!"

"Rope or bullet, boys, no matter. Let the woman go. Hey, listen, now—"

Travis came close, squinted at Kenly with his mirthless stare.

"Damned funny, Jim; he's changed his face somehow. Not for the better, either. Still, I could swear he's the very one I met up with, the one who had your knife."

"Changed his rig too, and not for the better," Bowie remarked with contempt. "I know his face, somehow; can't place it myself. Look at the knife—tried to wrap the haft and hide it. A clumsy job. Ah—by heaven, where'd he get the knife? I know those eyes of his—he's the man. Travis! The very man! From New Orleans!"

Recognition darkened in Bowie's face. Still Kenly sat, spellbound, wordless. Now Josefa thrust in between them. She knew the tones if not the words, could read the hostile air, the deadly eyes, the swift mutters.

"Don Santiago!" she cried hastily. "You must not be angry. He is Don Hugo Kenly, and he would join the Texans. He is only taking me back to Bejar. You remember me—Josefa Candelaria?"

Bowie looked at her, started slightly, and saw her for the first time. He smiled; with the smile, a sudden change came upon the man. He removed his hat and bowed in the saddle, with the grace, the charm, that captivated all who knew him.

The chestnut hair seemed lighter than Kenly remembered it from that night in New Orleans. Upon the forehead a vivid scar sank back into the hair-roots. Again Kenly saw the hasty stool descending, the fallen man, the dead face upon the floor—

"Ah, Josefa, it is you!" Bowie was saying. "Of course I remember you, my dear

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little child of dream left wandering from the old days of happiness. But I am sorry to find you with this rascal. He's no friend of yours, surely?"

"But he is, he is, Santiago! He is a good man; you must not be angry with him. They sent him out to be killed. He may stay with you, and I'll go into Bejar alone."

Bowie straightened in the saddle, and his countenance hardened.

"You're too careless with your friends, *señorita*. This fellow tried to murder me. You see the scar I bear? He's an outlaw, a damned renegade; he struck me down with a foul blow, looted me, and then ran like a coward. Look at the uniform he wears—"

"No, no, Santiago!" cried the girl. "It is impossible; he is not a coward. I tell you he saved me from great danger, and my brother Pablo owes him much, also. He has saved me from the Comanche war chief, El Lobo Rojo. He is a brave man!"

"Red Wolf!"

The name passed around, surprisingly, from mouth to mouth. Bowie's face darkened. He put on his hat again.

"Red Wolf!" cried Travis. "The Mexicans have raised that devil against us—the Comanches are to be loosed on the settlements. Yes, we heard about it—"

"El Lobo Rojo is dead," spoke up the girl, glancing about in wonder. Bowie made a sharp motion.

"Never mind, never mind; I think we're surrounded by a pack of liars everywhere," he said, and his gaze fastened on Kenly. "Well, speak up, you! Is your tongue clipped, like your courage?"

"Yes; by finding that you're alive," said Kenly. "I didn't know you that night, Mr. Bowie. I had no intention of striking you down. There were two men attacking a woman, and I took you for one of the men."

"And took my knife for your own, you would add." Bowie's voice was like steel. "You are a lying scoundrel, sir. You are skulking in Mexican uniform. You're a damned renegade—a traitor to your own blood. You're lower than a rattler, sir! By the Eternal, you gave Jim Bowie a foul blow and—" Bowie checked himself abruptly, but the fierce, fiery blue of his eyes changed not. "Travis, call the boys back a bit, and I'll deal with this hound myself."

"Looks like we done killed enough rattlers this morning," drawled Travis. Then Kenly found tongue, in swift anger.

"You go too far, Bowie," he said. "I'll not be put down by you as a traitor. I thought you dead, killed by my hand unintentionally. I was told you were dead, that vengeance for your death was after me hotfoot, that your friends and family—"

Bowie snarled suddenly at him, like a wolf.

"You heard aright. I'm a dead man. I've no friends, no family; nothing but the cause of liberty. I've no past, no future—bah! You're right, Travis. As for you, you scoundrel, here is the knife. You needn't hide the haft; it's no knife of mine. The blade is foul as your own accursed hand. You're free to go, rejoin your friends, my renegade lieutenant. And this girl—" He paused, glaring again with cold menace. "She's too good a girl to be with you. If she comes to harm by you, look out! Ah—I forgot. You robbed me of more than the knife, that night. The map, eh? That's what you were after all the time."

"That's false," snapped Kenly. "If you want the map, here it is."

HE produced the folded paper General Cos had given him. Bowie, with a wondering expression, took it and glanced at it. His face changed. He crumpled up the paper with an oath, then thrust it back at Kenly.

"A clumsy forgery, false like yourself. Bah! You're a liar from start to finish. The San Saba silver is not for you or your damned Mexican friends; it's too well covered. Now, clear out!" His voice lifted sharply. "Don't waste powder on this rat, boys! I wish you no harder luck than to stick with your friends, lieutenant. Tell Cos we're coming to call on him. Next

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time we see you, it's a bullet or rope. Clear out!"

Kenly met the fierce eyes steadily, angrily. Mechanically, he pocketed the map.

"You're hasty, unjust, and in the wrong," he said bitterly. "I can prove to you—"

"Clear out, damn you!"

"Very well. Some day I'll have your apology for this action, these words."

"Some day I'll hang your pelt on the gates of Bejar," rasped Bowie, and turned his back. He gestured to his men and they rode away. Kenly looked after them, trembling with futile anger. Then Josefa touched his arm, timidly.

"What does it mean, Hugo? Did he say that you struck him? Ah, he is terrible in his anger. And the knife—then it was his knife? I do not understand."

"He and all of them will think better of this some day," Kenly said slowly. "Poor devil! No past and no future—"

"It is because of Señora Bowie and the two children, all dead in a day from the cholera," she said. "He is of good heart, my dear; there will come another day, for always God sends the time. And what do we do now? Will you ride away?"

"Small chance," said Kenly. Run for it now, cross Texas, hide himself again in his own country? No, a thousand times no! This called for something else. At the moment, these Texans were in no mood to listen to reason. "We go on to Bejar, my dear."

He sent his horse forward. His bitterness threw everything into a tangle; horns in a bag, as Pablo had once said. He could not blame Bowie, of the hot eyes and the scarred head. That accursed knife! It had served him well and ill again.

"Josefa," he broke out, "you must believe me when I say that the blow was a mistake, and that I did not rob him, but that hag Matilde. She knows, Pablo knows, Don Rodrigo knows. Ask Pablo."

"I believe you, my heart," she said simply. Kenly thrust the knife at her.

"Take it; you've earned it."

"I'll clean it and keep it for Don Santiago," she said. "And you go to Bejar?"

"Yes, by heavens, and I'll have a word with Cos that he'll remember," said Kenly, his voice edged, his eyes stormy and hot with new fury.

So he had been sent to death. Josefa a bribe, Red Wolf bought over to hurl his Comanches on the settlements; all those who knew of the map, wiped out. The map false, the story of the Veramendi family all false—liars, all of them! A score was to be reckoned up, though he himself might come off poorly. The plan had miscarried, but at least he was a lieutenant and an officer, not to be easily silenced. Well, one word more, then! Face down the liar, see what happened, and then go to his own folk and damn the consequences. No more sneaking out of trouble. A new life, a new will, meet the devil halfway from now on! So, his head high, Kenly rode past the sentries at the gates and on into Bejar.

Straight through down to the Alamo, there to report, find General Cos, and have matters out, blast him! Not the town he had left, by a good deal. Wounded men, troops being stationed, powder and shot carried about, barricades being flung up in all the streets. Confusion incident upon the morning's fight was everywhere.

They passed through the town, on across the river, and were dismounting within the Alamo confines, when Kenly heard a glad, eager shout. Pablo came running up, his pocked face in a welter of joy. He caught Josefa in a quick embrace.

"Ah, little one! And it is you, *señor! Gracias a Dios!*"

"My mother, Pablo? And the others?"

Pablo scratched his head, grinning

"All are back—that is, not all. Your mother's safe. It was only a small affair, my lieutenant. When that accursed chief rode away, his warriors lost heart. We had killed not a few of them, too; those three Americanos fought like devils, I must say. Two of them died, but Mateo and three of the others are still alive. We brought in some scalps, I can tell you! We only got in late last night—"

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"Take care of the horses and Josefa," said Kenly abruptly. "Where's General Cos?"

"At the Veramendi mansion, *señor*. You have heard of the battle outside, by the Concepcion mission? Well, you may not see the general; he won't be expecting you."

"Doubtless," Kenly said grimly.

"You see, *señor*, he will be furious. Some one lied to him; I could not make anyone listen to the truth. It is said that you ran away."

"Bah! I'll have a word or two myself, perhaps."

"So may Doña Maria," muttered Pablo. "That damned doña is at the bottom of a good many wells, and it does not pay to fall in—"

A BRUSQUE farewell to Josefa, and Kenly was striding away, back into the town. He was borne, upon a high fury that would devour all obstacles.

Once he paused, and once only, in his course. A small knot of soldiers and citizens were gawking at a placard nailed upon the front of a closed shop. It was in Spanish and English, hand lettered, proclaiming aloud:

2,000 REWARD FOR THE CAPTURE AND DELIVERY OF GENERAL COS. TEXAS AND LIBERTY!

A sniff, and Kenly went on.

The audience was hardly won; all headquarters was in wild alarm over the happenings of the morning, and something very like panic was evidenced in places. If ninety men could destroy five hundred, what would the whole army of the Tejanos do when they arrived? Perhaps the artillery would save the day, however.

Kenly was in at last. The big room held aides; General Cos leaned back in his chair at the heavy table. Of all the countenances in the room, his alone was calm; rather, it was controlled by a look of annoyed surprise.

"So, you have returned, sir? You have a report to make, you demand to see me at once. Your business is urgent. Ha! Well, I have small time to waste on failures."

So Cos was resorting to accusation? Kenly, in hot fury, mustered up his Spanish. He flung reserve to the four walls and the winds.

"You be damned. You've already wasted time on failure. Yes, I've a report for you. Lies, a false errand, a false map, a false guide. You stooped low, *señor!* Returned, am I? Not by your doing, not by your hope. You lied to me about Bowie. I met him this morning outside town. He's alive. You traded an innocent girl to that Comanche chief so that he'd lend his help. Well, he's dead and we're not. How do you like my report, sir?"

Ghastly silence around the room, stupefied faces. General Cos sat unruffled, but his color had somewhat darkened. Then he smiled thinly.

"Ah! You met Bowie the rebel—and you live? Good. Perhaps you returned here of your own free will? Perhaps he sent you to spy upon us?"

Kenly caught his breath with fury. Then the door behind him was flung open. It slammed upon click of rapid heels and swish of angry skirt. Like a blond Jezebel, Doña Maria fronted him.

"You are back! You are here!"

Kenly stared into her eyes coldly. "With the girl you sold into slavery!"

The word sent a tremor upon the room.

"Oh!" Doña Maria whitened. "Captain Flatnose, eh?"

"Silence!" snapped General Cos, and leaned forward with interest in his eyes. "What's this charge about the girl who was here, and the Comanche chief, Maria?"

"You expect truth from her?" flashed out Kenly, and laughed. "She offered the girl to the Indian; where were you in the bargain, that you pretend innocence?"

"*Por Dios!*" exclaimed Cos haughtily. "Do you think that I, a caballero—"

"Who sent me to be slain in ambush, and other soldiers with me?"

Doña Maria screamed out. "He accuses me? It is a lie! I tell you—"

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"Silence, by the thunders of God! Shut your mouth!" General Cos came to his feet, his calm broken at last. Doña Maria bit her lip. "Lieutenant, I knew nothing of this, I assure you; in fact, His Excellency had other plans for that girl. As for you, what talk is this of ambush? Nothing of the sort. You were given a false map, true; you were sent off on a false trail, true; why? So that you, and the others with you, might run away to follow the map, and the devil swallow you up. If you prate of truth, take it and welcome. And now you are under arrest."

"As you please," said Kenly. "At least I spoke my mind."

"I can forgive boldness," rejoined Cos. "The charge is different. You deserted your command in the face of the enemy. The penalty is the firing squad."

"A false charge, false as the rest," snapped Kenly. "I pursued the Comanche. Red Wolf is dead—a pleasant bone for you, Doña Maria."

"False? That remains to be seen, *señor*. You yourself have admitted meeting the rebel Bowie this morning outside town. We shall look into this. He sent you on in to spy upon us, eh? Well, you can sit in a cell and do your spying," and a smile touched the lips of Cos. "You'll not be a solitary, either. You'll have a guard inside as well as outside. Take him!"

The aides closed in, with a glitter of steel. Kenly was marched away, but his head was high as he departed. At least, he had had his way. He had met the devil halfway, and laughed as they led him out.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FACE OF JOSEFA.

SILENCE; and now and again upon the silence, ghostly voices, drifting past the window. Day upon day, sunlight and mist, darkness, mist again and sunlight. Twice a day the door was shoved open, a guard thrust in a wooden bowl and an olla of water, and the door slammed again with rasp of bolts.

How long? Kenly had no idea; he lost track. A touch of fever, for a day or so, threw him off balance. His personal belongings, soap and a razor, such as he had kept on his person; no tobacco, no nothing. Yet he waited in savage patience, a smile in his soul if not on his lips. He had met the devil halfway, at least! The thought lingered. He had far to go, but he had not flinched. The firing squad? Bah! He had doubted that from the first. He had read something else in the eyes of General Cos—something he was far from comprehending. Not the firing squad, however.

Now and again, the distant crack of rifles. Voices outside the window, drifting, floating past and gone again, yet significant.

"They will do nothing, those Tejanos. Our defenders are too strong—"

"They talk, argue, shout, and are afraid to meet us. Their forces are breaking up. Is it true that Santa Anna is bringing up the whole army?"

"*Quien sabe?* Doubtless it is true—"

It was not the calabozo that held Kenly, but an interior room in that very Zambrano Row, cornering upon Acequia and Flores Streets; that very row past which a private soldier, one Hugo Kenly, had walked guard upon a night now far buried in a maze of circumstance.

The room was of stone walls plastered with mud and thinly whitewashed. Moderate in size, it was lighted and ventilated only by the tiny barred window, too high for reach. The main door was of solid planks armored with iron scrolling and bolt-heads. A smaller door, but similarly fortified, in the side wall, apparently indicated connection with other precincts of the row. It was locked and never opened. For its purpose, the room was well adapted. Kenly was held incommunicado. Yet—there were the voices.

"So the terrible Texans do nothing but camp and argue!" rose a woman's laugh. "And their men drift away—"

"They are like children," barked her escort. "They have no artillery, we have twice as many men as they, the whole town is a fortress—"

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Talking, argument, discussion. Kenly could picture the camp outside this barricaded town, with dissension running rife, with politicians and self-seekers playing at soldier, with settlers departing to get in their crops. Rifles against the heavy artillery of General Cos—yes, they were like children, those rough, unruly rebels!

There were no furnishings in the room. A drain in one corner, a pallet of soiled, mildewed blankets, a wooden peg in the wall upon which to hang the olla.

Suddenly, of a morning, there was a rustle and scrape of footsteps. The bolts or bars rasped free of socket, the door was jerked open. A man in shabby private's uniform fairly burst in, staggering under a violent shove. A bundle of bedding was hurled in after him, and the door slammed. The man recovered balance, and with a curse glared about. He was Devore, gaunt, bareheaded, savage.

His baleful eyes fell upon Kenly. His jaw dropped. The startled expression of his unshaven countenance was ludicrous, although his company was most unwelcome.

"For cripes' sake!" he blurted. "'Tain't you, is it? Well, this *is* a go!"

"No choice of mine," snarled Kenly.

"So that's what they meant?" Devore erupted in a torrent of oaths. "Found me stuck in the wrong jug, they said—thought I was here, huh? And I been cussing for bein' stuck away in that damned calabozo! And now look at me—*arrgh!*"

Kenly caught the words with a flash of understanding. He could interpret now the parting jollity of General Cos. Devore was to have been his cell mate, and somebody had erred. Kenly laughed harshly. Devore stared at him.

"Last I seen of you, you were streakin' it, leaving me and the rest up a tree with them Injuns. By the looks of your back, I thought none of us would ever see your ugly mug again. So Cos jugged yuh, huh?"

"You blasted scoundrel!" said Kenly angrily. "You're the one who reported me deserting, huh?"

"Had a good reason, didn't I?" Devore replied sulkily. He picked up his bedding and kicked it into pallet shape along the unoccupied wall.

"You knew good and well I took after that Comanche guide of ours."

"Yeah!" and Devore jeered at him, then produced a twist of tobacco and bit at it. He mouthed the chew for a moment, and continued. "Yah! With that map o' the San Saba country in your pocket, huh? Oh, I heard all that yarn ye told about fetching the gal in and so forth—but I don't swaller that for a minute."

Kenly laughed. "Better get your swallowing apparatus in shape, then. Yes, I fetched her back and then had to come into the city. Couldn't help myself."

"You're slick, all right. I heard you'd damned the gin'ral to his face, too. But what game were you and that Injun chief up to, huh? Where's he now?"

"Wolf meat." Kenly's ire rose at this confident braggart who refused to believe the obvious truth, thinking himself so smart. Devore was more than braggart, he knew; apt at any deviltry.

"What? You done for him?"

"Somebody did, at all events."

"Why, you cussed fool! When he knowed where that Almagres silver is, and all he wanted was the gal? And you let that chance slip, when you might have palavered with him—oh, hell!" Devore spat disgustedly, then mused darkly. "You come with the gal—how'd you git through them Texans?"

"They passed me through, both of us."

"Huh! On account of the gal, and not knowing you with that face, sure. Hey! Didn't happen to meet a particular friend of yours out there, did ye?" and Devore grinned.

"So you know Bowie's alive, do you?"

HELL, yes; I've knowed it all along," and Devore chuckled. "I knowed he wasn't dead that night in New Orleans, anyhow up to time we made the schooner. And 'cause why? I was back at the Beausejour for licker after you thought you'd laid him cold, that's why. They said it'd be nip an' tuck with him; but

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he's the kind hard to kill. I had no call to set you easy about him, blast you! So you seen him out there, huh?"

"Yes," said Kenly shortly.

"And he let you go—didn't know you, huh? Well, you've got me to thank for that face, mister."

"Damn your impertinence, I've got you to thank for nothing," Kenly snapped. Devore rolled his quid, eyed him with calculation, and grinned again.

"Lookit, now. You cracked Bowie's head and made your getaway with us. You'd be a damn sight better off if he was dead; he don't forget a blow. You ain't out of the woods by a long shot—once he knows what you look like now. Remember that," and the man surveyed Kenly with bloodshot eyes, low cunning in his brutal features. "You're too high-faluting to take up with the likes o' me, huh? Well, think ag'in, mister. It's you and me together.

"We're the only white men in Bejar who know about that San Saba business and where the mines lay. That's why Cos has put us here."

"How about your two cronies?"

"Them?" Devore named his two companions from New Orleans, with an oath. "They're back yonder with their hair lifted. After you lit out, the three of us made a break, figgering to follow you; but them Injuns done for the other two. I slipped back into camp. Damned if they didn't put up a fight, women and all! We just did get here 'fore them damned Texans showed up, too."

"And you reported me to Cos, you lying devil!"

"Well, why not? You shot me, didn't you?" said Devore impudently. "This leg still bothers me like hell, and you come off with a new face and another purty gal. And it was me give 'em both to you, remember. Yes, I informed on you, and Cos sent for me, and what'd I get, blast him? The calabozo! All for telling him I knowed what was up and I'd do the San Saba job if he'd supply me another outfit, and make me a lieutenant. I told him you'd not be back, not with Jim Bowie in the landscape; and for why. Then he clapped me in the jug—and here I be." Devore spanked his hip with jubilant hand. "Luck, I call it."

"The luck's all yours," Kenly said dryly.

"No, it ain't." Devore assumed a more friendly air. "You still got the map safe?"

"Yes." Kenly was about to add that it was false, then checked himself.

"Well, it's you and me, mister. S'pose them Texans take the town—it ain't likely, but s'pose they do?

"I'll keep mum on you. You keep mum on me; they got some regular army men with 'em. Two of us—we'll light out for the San Saba. Suit you?"

"You're wasting breath," Kenly said in contempt. "I wouldn't trust you with the coppers on a dead man's eyes. You can't hold Bowie over me, or the Texans either."

"All right, all right, then I won't," Devore said. "We'll git out of here; then you'll find I'm a right good feller. There's a door that opens; likely only one guard—say, how long you in for?"

"Until they shoot me."

"What's that? Shoot you?" Devore exclaimed in alarm. Kenly shot an oath at him.

"You lying hound, none of your pretending! You told Cos I deserted; and he said it meant a firing squad for me—"

He broke off. Into the staring face of Devore rushed a crimson tide. He shook his fist in the air and his voice broke into a hoarse shout.

"It can't be! I'll tell him it wasn't so! You be shot—and leave me alone, and without that there map? You hand it over! I'm a-going to have it."

"You sure have that map on the brain!" said Kenly. "Keep away from me or I'll drop you in your tracks, you fool."

THAT Devore was completely obsessed by the thought of the map and the San Saba silver, was obvious. Indeed, at this moment he looked close to being a madman. He was all in a flurry of greedy inflated fears, embittered hopes,

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wild chagrin and wilder resolve—his ignorance of this country, his very ignorance in general, made him a prey to chaotic imagination and credulity run riot.

No doubt he thought the silver lay about on the ground for the picking up. He hesitated, fingers clenched to rough palms, his lips atremble. Sweat beaded his flushed features. His haggard eyes measured Kenly with hot insistence.

"I know all the tricks of hidin' a bit o' paper," he growled. "If I have to search you for it, I'll have that map!"

"You lay a filthy finger on me and I'll smash your cursed face flatter'n mine," snarled Kenly. "The map's no good."

"That's a lie." Devore relaxed; those hard, undeviating brown eyes broke him with their steadiness, their animosity. He sank down on his pallet, and a low growl broke from him. "I'm goin' to have that map afore you're took out of here. Mind you." For a space he relapsed into brooding silence, leaning forward to spit, then fastening his eyes on Kenly again.

"I will if I have to throttle it out of you," he muttered, as though to himself. "Cos told me I could have it if I got it. Pumping questions at me like I was a dog! And then puttin' me in here—" the grumbling, throaty voice fell into silence.

Kenly sat in silence, his brain jerking to the words. "Cos told me I could have it!" So Cos had been questioning Devore, eh?

Still something behind all this, still something dark, unguessed, sinister. Why not shoot these two Americans out of hand and be done with them?

The map, the map! Why had Cos condescended to talk about it with this despised recruit? Kenly's viewpoint cleared a trifle. Devore had bawled out that he would reverse his testimony rather than lose his chance at the map. The man was absolutely mad about it. Bowie had not wanted it, Cos had not asked for it, Kenly himself was sick of the thing, whether false map or true map.

Kenly put his head in his hands and tried to think it out. Cos, he felt certain, cared nothing about killing him. That threat of espionage was merely a charge to be held in reserve. Cos had something in him of the hidalgo, of the grand gentleman. He had been outraged, utterly furious, at the exposure of Doña Maria's deviltry. Ah! Doña Maria!

Something seemed to click. Mental transference, perhaps, of sheer desperate thought.

Devore relapsed again into his dull stare, his mumble. Kenly sat in thought. A glimmer of light had reached him, but only a glimmer.

Heels clicked in the street. A ghostly voice floated in. A thin, ghostly voice indeed, like a loud whisper.

"*Señor!* Can you hear me, *señor*, is that your window?"

Kenly lifted himself—rather, was lifted by that voice in rapid Spanish. Pablo, honest Pablo! He glanced at Devore, who was sunk in glowering mood, had heard nothing or had not distinguished the words. Kenly, beneath the window, straightened up, stretched, yawned with exaggerated tone.

"Ho, ho-ho! Yes. Speak on."

"All is well," came the swift-winged ghostly voice. "The rooster loves the cockerel who crows bravely. Fear not. He admires you. A friend is at hand also—" The voice trailed off into lilting song and went drifting away on the sunlight. Kenly came back to his pallet again.

Oh, marvel! A very answer to his thoughts, to his wonderings. So Cos admired him for his bold defiance, his torrent of hot speech! Admiration caused this cell, then? Well, perhaps. Queer things were going on in this town, this center of all Mexican force in Texas—who ruled San Antonio de Bejar, ruled all Texas. Singular human motives were in play. Doña Maria cast aside like an old glove? There was murder in this doing. Yes, Cos would resent what she had done.

A friend at hand? That might mean anything. Kenly sank back into bitterness. Friends? He had no friends. He was alone; darker and ever darker, with no

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dawn in sight anywhere. Darkest before dawn? He jeered mentally at the phrase.

KENLY saw himself committed to hard quarters, with this fellow glowering across the room. Devore sat hunched and brooding, maundering to himself, darting malevolent bloodshot glances; the obsession of the map, his wild imaginings, had taken full hold upon him. Crazed, perhaps, with the easy white tequila, so easily obtained; a fiery liquor that brought madness to the brain.

So the long day slipped past the grated opening, and while heels clicked and voices floated past, the voice of Pablo Saccaplata came no more. By the gradual rising shadows it was getting on to day's end.

Devore had subsided into an uneasy doze, flat and sprawled, then slept profoundly but with the twitchings and mutterings of troubled dreams. At last he wakened, started up, stood staring around, tousled of thatch and red-rimmed of eye.

"What's this?" he cried hoarsely. "I thought them Texans were on us and set to hang me. I won't be ketched, I tell you! They've sworn to shoot any of us caught in Mexican uniform. I'm getting out, hear me? Hello, there, mister. I guess I was dreaming, huh? Did you hear Santy Anny is coming back?"

"No," Kenly replied. "Is it true?"

"I dunno. Bringing the hull army, they say. Slow business, though; weeks and months—hey!" Devore started in sudden recollection. "Remember, I aim to have that there map afore you're took out—"

The map! Let the obsessed fool have it then; but no. Kenly eyed Devore grimly. Give in to this madman? Never.

There was a grating at the door. The bowl of mush, with two wooden spoons sticking in it now, was thrust inside; an olla of water; the door slammed again. With animal growl Devore sprang forward. Kenly was just in time to stand defense of the rations, and perhaps of himself. He stood over the bowl, fists clenched.

"What'll it be? Spoon for spoon, with you keeping your distance?"

"All right, all right," whined Devore. "I'm famished; it's share and share alike, ain't it? All right, then. If you go to grab—"

"Sit down."

With the bowl between them, they spooned at arm's length, eyes upon each other. Kenly had the situation in hand, but he found himself dreading the night. Having gobbled until the spoons scraped bottom, Devore lurched back to his pallet. Kenly returned to his own couch, warily taking the bowl with him.

Darkness drew down, the cold night mist; Kenly shivered under the thin covering. The raucous breathing of Devore passed into a regular undeviating snore. Blinking into the darkness, Kenly found the heavy, regularly punctuated silence weighing down his lids. His eyes insisted upon rest, while outpost ears served sentry duty.

He waked with a start, eyes wide, every sense keen. What had roused him? All was silence—ah! The very silence, the sudden cessation of guttural sound. The cold hand of close and stealthy dagger set his heart to pounding furiously, his flesh to crawling.

"Damn it!" he muttered. "I'm a fool."

His own voice startled him, relaxed his tension. A fluttering sigh from across the room, a grunt, a shift of position; the heavy breathing began again, regular and unchanging, softly sliding into a snore. A fool indeed. The fellow over there was sawing wood for all he was worth.

Kenly sank back. For a space his fingers, his feet, held tension; while this lasted, he could not sleep, he knew. Sleep! Nonsense; he must sleep. Devore would not dare attempt anything. Slumber would have brought sanity to his obsessed brain.

Yet the darkness felt charged with evil. For a stolen moment, as he fancied, Kenly drowsed away again; and suddenly, the monitory hand again plucked at his senses. With a wrench, he burst wide awake, aquiver with suspense. How long had he slept? The room was deathly, mysteriously silent. He could hear nothing, he could

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see nothing, but a prickling at his nerve-ends brought sweat to his face.

Pent breath, sly and cautious movement stealing athwart the black silence. Then, as Kenly lay rigid and strained, every faculty intent, he did hear. Stealthy movemen broke the spell. Up he sat abruptly, and challenged with a voice torn from tight throat.

"Devore? What are you up to, damn you?"

No answer. Slow movement receding now. Then a rustle of the blankets, a muttered groan, a craftily feigned wakening.

"Hey! Wha's matter?"

"None of your tricks. I heard you. Keep your own side of the room."

"You be damned. Save your gab till daylight and lemme sleep."

Sleep he did, by the signs. Kenly fought slumber; this time he had not deceived himself. He must stay awake. That cautious movement peopled the darkness with horror and wild imaginings. Stay awake, yes; but it could not go on for ever. There was a mad maggot in the brain yonder. Better, perhaps, let the fellow have the map of his crazed desire—Kenly yielded, insensibly.

A DREAM rushed upon him; the claws of a nightmare fiend were clutching at his throat, sinking into his flesh, throttling him. Dreams, filled with combat, with creeping things—but it was no stark illusion that sprung him awake. The early gray of dawn. Fingers of flesh and bone fumbling at him. As his eyes opened, the avid visage of Devore was drenching him with hot and eager breath.

A gasp of realization. With frantic revulsion he flung the beast from him; as he came to his feet, Devore grappled him, snarling oaths. Kenly's fist smashed in, again and again; the blows were unfelt, ignored. Devore had amazing strength. Like a wild beast indeed, he sought to pull down, to throttle, to tear.

Kenly twisted suddenly, got the gnashing, snarling head thrust back under his elbow, thrust knee to stomach; a wrench and a heave, foul breath hissing in his face, and a sudden scream burst from Devore. He crumpled, was broken loose, was sent in a headlong sprawl on his pallet.

"You've done for my leg ag'in! Oh, damn your blasted soul, my leg, my leg!"

"I'll do for you as well as your leg, next time," panted Kenly, and dropped back upon his own rags.

The scuffle, the curses, the scream of Devore, brought no query from the outer world. Evidently the guard took no heed what the two Yanquis might do or say.

Wet and heaving, Kenly strove to steady his nerves. He lay watching the brightening gray of daylight; despite his efforts at composure, he was fagged physically and mentally. His brief periods of sleep had brought no rest; his inner consciousness, his muscles, his brain itself, had been on the alert.

Evidently Devore had suffered no great injury. He sat up presently, and his voice came in a growl.

"I aim to have that map off'n you yet, blast you! And once I get it, by the 'tarnal I'll know what to do with it." The growl subsided into a rumble of self talk. "Make everything hunkydory for me, that's what. Bowie'll pay to have that map back. Take me in and ask no questions—"

Kenly whistled softly to himself. So here was sense at last! No madness after all. Devore was ridden by fear of his past. If he fell into Texan hands, he counted on that map to save him from any army officers who might know him. The poor devil was obsessed with the value of the map—thought that Bowie would pay for it!

The door was opened. The guard thrust in the olla and a cracked wooden bowl.

"Come, *hombres!* The other bowl!" he directed. Kenly caught up the supper bowl to hand him. Through the air came a dull, heavy report.

"What's that? Cannon?" asked Kenly.

"Cannon, yes." The guard grinned. He was a young fellow, amiable enough. "Those Tejanos are breaking camp and

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departing. The general is hastening them with one of the big guns from the Alamo. *Hasta luego!*"

It was the first time Kenly had exchanged any word with his guards. A flutter of gay voices, of laughter, of distant cheering, came in upon the window. Devore hitched himself around to grab his share from the bowl Kenly put down.

"What'd he say, mister?" he demanded as he scooped up a spoonful of mush. "Was that fighting—listen! Another cannon. Eighteen pounder, by cripes!"

Kenly grinned at him and was prompted to malicious report.

"Yes; he said the Texans are attacking. Prob'ly they'll be in the town before nightfall."

Wild alarm leaped in the gaunt countenance of Devore. He ate hurriedly, his breath coming in quick gasps, his animal courage sapped by mortal fear. He gobbled down his foot and hitched himself back on his bedding.

"I won't have it!" he broke out. "We're shut in here. We're liable to be ketched. I won't have it—I tell you, I won't be ketched like a rat and strung up or shot! I'll fight 'em—gimme a chance, gimme a chance!"

He leaped up, hurled himself at the door, battered it furiously and vainly; and fell back again, sobbing with spent strength, sucking his bleeding hands, glowering and muttering.

"Ketched like a rat in this Mexican uniform!" came his voice in panic. "If the town's took we'll starve to death in this hole afore we're found! And if we're found, by cripes, it's the firing squad—"

AFTER a time the man fell asleep. Kenly did not regret his lie; at least, it had served to twist Devore's mind away from him.

The cannon sounded no more. The daylight hours wore on. Kenly dozed a little, envying the deep and profound slumber which held Devore fast bound. He himself dared not sleep.

Late in the afternoon Devore wakened. He stirred, sat up; became restive as the wolf which, having kenneled for the day, looks forward to the night call.

"They ain't took the town yet," he muttered, listening. "Night's the time. That's when they'll bust in. I got to have that map. I got to git out o' here—"

His maunderings fell quiet; he bit at his twist of tobacco and chewed steadily.

The afternoon light thinned and paled. There came a rasp of bolts at the door; it swung outward to disclose the shadowed figure of the guard, bowl in one hand, musket in the other, face gloomed by the long visor of his cap. He started forward to put down the bowl.

"So you want the other one—then take it, damn you!"

The snarl burst from Devore. Like a dog unleashed on the quarry, he caught up the empty bowl in mid swoop, uncoiled from his pallet, and with a leap brought down the bowl upon the guard's high-capped crown.

Already cracked, the wooden bowl flew in fragments. Cap driven over eyes, the soldier pitched forward. Almost before his musket clattered on the stones, Devore had swept it up. He faced about with the weapon at charge, bayonet flickering.

"Out wi' the map, damn you!"

His unshaven face was a quivering mask of fury. No wavering now in those bloodshot eyes, no least indecision in that gaunt countenance. His soldier training showed in his poise; no mercy in those blazing eyes.

"The map, I say!" lifted his voice. "Hand it over!"

The body of the guard, face down, lay as the only barrier between them. The dusking room was very still; Kenly's gaze held that of Devore for the instant.

"All right," he said quietly, and produced the folded bit of paper.

"Drop it and stand back!" snapped Devore.

Kenly obeyed. The paper eddied to the floor, and it fell near Devore. He stooped warily, eyes and musket vigilant. He groped for it, found it, dared a glance at

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it, and tucked it away. Again he stooped and groped, found the guard's cap, yanked it free, put it on his own head.

He backed to the open doorway, his musket at cock, blazing triumph in his face. Then he was outside, slammed the door to, and was gone.

Kenly started forward. Freedom beckoned; out of this, off to join the Texans! A sense of shock checked him, as his eyes flitted to the figure on the floor. A tumble of glossy hair had appeared there. Kenly knelt swiftly, turned the body of the guard over. Long black hair framed a face—the face of Josefa.

CHAPTER XII.

BOWIE'S PLAN.

THERE was no blood. The bowl had shattered easily; much of the blow had been spent upon the cap and the coiled mass of hair. Josefa's face was white, colored only by the stain of her parted lips and the dark lines of curved brows and drooped lashes.

Kenly forgot all else, forgot Devore, freedom awaiting. He lifted the girl and laid her on his own pallet. He was about to bring water from the olla when she sighed, and her eyes fluttered open.

"Josefa! You're all right? You know me?"

In the fading reflection of the twilight her arms crept up about him.

"Ah, Hugo!" After a minute she sat up, unaided. "I remember—there was someone else in here. A beast's voice, a strike—"

"It was the other American. The man Mateo."

"But he struck me—he struck me!" Her eyes drove about the room.

"He thought you a soldier, my dear; he's gone, took the musket and ran for it." Kenly pressed her hands; her eyes came back to him in reassurance, in soft warm greeting.

"It's been so long, my dear, so long!" she said gently. "I could not come before. We had to await the day—God sends the time, always. The right man on guard—"

"Why are you here?" burst out Kenly. "My dear, this is insanity! It might have got you into trouble everywhere. Unless there was a reason."

"A better reason than seeing you again?" She smiled suddenly at him, drew back her arms, began to stow up her loosened hair. A swift flood of eagerness, of avid happiness, came into her face.

"Well, there's a reason, true. I came for you, Hugo; we'll go together. As soon as darkness falls. Don Santiago will be waiting—Don Santiago, you comprehend? Pablo arranged it here for me, I arranged it there for you—"

"Bowie?" The word broke from Kenly. "You don't mean Bowie?"

"But yes. Listen, my Hugo; I went out to their camp, I saw Don Santiago. Ah, what a caballero! He is all iron and fire, that man. I talked with Pablo and straightened everything out in my own mind, first; I learned everything. I laid it all before Don Santiago—that you are a good man, you had been deceived, you are not a soldier for Mexico but would fight for Texas. I asked Don Santiago to take back his knife, and you with it. Hugo, he believed me—almost! And he will believe you and me if we do something—well, that is all cleared up. That was my work there."

She was all aglow, all delicious eagerness. Kenly listened in stupefaction.

"Bowie will listen to reason, then! That's glorious, Josefita—"

"But wait, wait!" She thrust him aside, laughing. "Pablo has been at work here for you. General Cos knows now that you did not run away, that you only chased El Lobo Rojo to save me. He admires you. He has kept you here to keep you safe until word came from *El Presidente* about you."

Bewilderment here, even though it verified already sent information. She caught at his arm.

"Tonight, Hugo! I have arranged everything with Don Santiago. In half an hour

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from now, when it gets dark, General Cos is going to inspect a new battery placed between the town and the Alamo. Don Santiago and some of his men will be hiding there along the creek. You are to be there—I have a cap for you, a cloak. Don Santiago trusts you to join the escort and carry off the general when the rifles begin to speak. Pablo has a horse waiting for you. It is desperate, but it will be a surprise, and Don Santiago says you're the man for it if you want to join the Texans—"

Fantastic? Kenly suddenly perceived the actual possibility of the harebrained project, as it first appeared. It could be done readily, under cover of the falling darkness. Uniformed already, with cap and cloak, on horseback, he could fall in with the general's escort. Bowie's riflemen would open up unexpectedly. To seize Cos and get away with him—horse and spurs! Not only feasible, but it would work. And he was the man for it. Well said!

"Good! Good!" breathed Kenly eagerly. "But you, Josefa?"

"We will go now. There are no guards outside. The man here was a friend of Pablo, who arranged it. I will steal away to the camp of the Texans. Come, we had best be gone—I will give you the cap and cloak, lead you to where Pablo waits with the horse—"

She sprang up happily. Kenly gave her a hand; the whole thing was flaring in his brain now. With Cos went Bejar! Yes, he was the man for it—

"Ah!" The girl was fumbling at the door now, beating at it. A piteous little cry escaped her. "Help me—it is stuck fast—"

Kenly flung himself at the door. Stuck fast, slammed by Devore in violent exit? Fast it was, but not stuck. It yielded to his thrusting only by the slight play of the socketed bolts.

"Locked!" cried out Josefa, aghast. "He did it, that other man—"

Yes. Devore had done this, deliberately, vindictively. There was a terrible silence; then, like a caged bird, Josefa went fluttering to the other door in the side wall, trying it, beating at it, falling back from it.

"That one's always locked," said Kenly. Dull reaction was upon him. But she fired up swiftly and darted to him.

"Here! I have the knife, Hugo. You and I, the knife and the general, all to Don Santiago—there is still time! I think God willed me to bring the knife." She snatched it from under her loose uniform tunic. It was clean again. In the dusk the heavy blade glinted; the silver work of the haft, bared now of bloody wrappings, palely glimmered. "Cut with it, dear one! Quickly!"

A chance, at least. Kenly seized the blade.

HE tried one door, then the other. The iron scrolls and studs clinked to the nibbling point; they had been masterfully designed. The stingy intervals of wood did not admit the broadness of the blade. The wood itself was hard-seasoned, the stone jambs were flinty.

In the uncertain light, with eyes straining and grip sweaty, Kenly grimly pecked and slashed and drilled, until weary hands and blade and door agreed: Enough!

"No use." Panting, he stepped back in despair, and his arm fell. "Scarcely could an axe break through this ironbound wood. Useless. Here; take the knife. Keep it."

"We have failed!" she breathed. "Don Santiago will not understand—"

A sob burst from her; she leaned against him, in a moment she was gathered sobbing in his arms. Words were useless.

Still holding her, he sank down upon the pallet, trying to comfort her. The brave spirit of her, housed in that slender frame covered by private's unform, was broken by this ghastly stroke of fate.

They fell upon silence, huddling there. Darkness had settled down. From without came silence of the night, complete brooding stillness, the air heavy with gathering rain. Sound carried far upon such atmosphere. Kenly's head lifted suddenly.

He caught a sound lifting across the silence. A faint, thin, distant sound that

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missed the girl's ear completely. It was like nothing he had ever heard except perhaps the scream of a trapped and burning horse. Yet it came from man's throat, somewhere afar in the night, followed by a short, savage lilt of shouted words he could not distinguish.

Yet others caught them and thrilled to that blare of sound bursting from the very soul of a man. A shout, and words, destined to echo across long years.

Others, not so far away as distance went —just up the creek where the Texans were spraddled and sprawled in makeshift camp. The order had gone forth, for General Austin was hopeless of daring anything. Days of rain and wet powder, ragged men, no supplies, no reinforcements.

A few hundred frontiersmen and settlers gathered here in sorry army, disputing, bickering, intriguing. The men, not a third enough to face the ranks of General Cos, already breaking away, the ranks melting daily. Complete absence of all discipline. Nothing but rifles and scant powder with which to face heavy artillery, grape, barricaded streets and houses, the fortress of the Alamo and superior forces—no wonder Austin gave up.

Retreat. Give up the hope of taking Bejar. Retreat and negotiate. Then it was that the heart-flurried scream of sheer frenzied agony burst from a man, and to a barrel-head by the fire leaped the man himself. All knew him. Ben Milam, insurgent and rebel, frontier fighter, legislator, officer in three armies—Ben Milam, who had come alone and hungry through six hundred miles of desert to fight for Texas.

"Retreat!" murmured his voice. "Retreat! Quit cold! Be damned if I do." And then the shout lifted, the words that carried like a trumpet-blare through the hungry, discouraged, failing ranks, the cry that overthrew all authority and changed the eddying current of history in this tiny corner of the world.

"Who'll go into Bejar with old Ben Milam?"

To Kenly, crouching in the darkness of his cell, came succeeding silence; and then a clamoring outburst of men's voices that swelled upon the night and died again. What it all meant, if it meant anything, he knew not. Yet he thrilled to the savage quality of that sound; the sheer eerie vibrance of it sent his spine a-tingle.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Freak Showers

ABOUT seventy-five rainstorms of fishes have been recorded in history. One of the most recent was in North Carolina, where several hundred fishlets, alive and dead, were sprinkled over a cotton field. It is thought that fish get on high when ponds are swept up by whirlwinds. Insects once rained in Hungary till the ground was covered to several inches. Frogs and mice occasionally come out of the sky.

Numerous strange showers are caused by dust. What look like rains of blood are full of red earth; of milk, chalk; of ink, soot. Once a shower of paper proved to be dried small weeds from an extinct pond. What have been taken for falls of honey have proved to be deposits by insects. Once Coloradans were astonished at a shower of sulphur. It was pollen from pine trees. So much pine pollen is said to have fallen on a ship off Nova Scotia that it was swept up by bucketsful.

—*Kenneth P. Wood.*

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The Men Who Make The Argosy

HIGH FLYING AUTHOR

(He wrote "Wings of Treachery" in this issue)

EUSTACE L. ADAMS, a regular contributor to ARGOSY since 1928, is forty-three, married, the father of three offspring which he describes as "expensive," and a writer because he says it is the only way he knows of making a decent living and having a lot of fun at the same time. He tried other methods first; he was a reporter on the Boston *Post;* an associate editor and later managing editor of *Popular Science Monthly,* a copy writer for an advertising agency, an automobile salesman, and later a distributor the owner of a taxicab business, and the follower of various and sundry other more or less legitimate occupations which it now wearies him to recall.

Between jobs he went to war. He drove an ambulance with the French Army, early in 1915, and came home to enter what he thought might be an interesting war between the United States and Mexico. In his enthusiasm, and to be sure that he got there, he enlisted in both the National Guard and the Naval Militia at the same time, wearing khaki in the daytime and the pretty uniform of a gob at night. This doubling in brass was discovered, however, when the National Guard was ordered south; he quickly found himself back in mufti, with nothing to do but to return to France. This time drove a staff car for the American Red Cross and an ambulance in the Champagne district.

When the United States entered the World War he came home and enlisted in a naval aviation unit, lugging millions of board feet from the end of one or another air station to the other end and back again. Officers finally tired of seeing him around and taught him to fly, made him an ensign, and then sent him away. He flew Coast Patrol at various stations on the Atlantic Coast, and was the first pilot on the scene when the *U.S.S. San Diego* was sunk by a German mine. After he was demobbed and deloused, he went to Cuba, having heard of a good revolution down there. But the thing had blown up by the time he got there, and he almost had to swim home.

He spends more time in Florida than anywhere else, simply because of the sunshine and the sailing. But he and his family are a restless lot, and they like to go places. Lately they have been in Hollywood, where three of Adams's stories (one of them, "Gambler's Throw," appeared in ARGOSY) have just been made into pictures. He writes with more or less regularity for various American magazines, and between whiles has published two novels, a book of travels and about sixteen boys' books. He likes sailing, swimming, wars, traveling anywhere, flying, the tropics—any place that is far away. He dislikes saving the world for democracy, staying too long in one place, snow—and *working.*

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Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

CONCERNING this week's novelette:

My story, "The Red Scorpion," is founded on one of the most romantic happenings in history—the deliverance of Sydney from famine by a convict who broke jail and found a way through the Blue Mountains. I have fictionized the circumstances, in order to render them more credible than the truth. But *Blaxland* was real. So were *Lawson, Wentworth, Lachlan Macquarie, John M'Arthur,* and *Chisholm.* Also *Lord Bathurst* and his great prize, of course. Actually *Lawson* and *Wentworth,* after their rescue, accompanied *George Blaxland* and shared his glory. I have made it an individual affair for story purposes.—I can't tell you what a kick I got out of writing this story! ANTHONY M. RUD.

A HAIR-SPLITTER who prefers to remain anonymous is

"J. D."

Don't let it bother *you,* but—while reading your weekly for Sept. 7, 1935, I was amazed—with a capital A! How was Theodore Roscoe's story ever published? Was he drunk, or did he have a touch of "Munumguru," and then some? How does he expect us to believe that the ignorant witch doctor, *Ga,* would ever know the length of one year? Or five? Or even that such a thing as a christian year, the length of which has been changed so often, exists?

Still more impossible, that he should know the exact second of twelve o'clock, when even the best-timed of clocks are a few fractions of a second or so off. Don't you think that if the witch doctor had said "a few moons," or something like that, it would have sounded much more authentic?

Furthermore, why that useless repeating of "Imagine me doing this, and imagine me doing that," when *Crade* and *Elizabeth* are trekking after their gew-gaw? I wonder how many readers go through all of that "imagine me" stuff. Is that why the story was called a *long* novelette?

And what an ending! Who is *Crade's* wife and why is she? And if she is *Elizabeth,* how? I think a little explanation would do *everyone* good—especially about that year stuff. No "kidden." Awaiting that explanation, I am,

AND Author Roscoe's reply:

In answer to "J. D.," who writes somewhat carpishly to inquire if I were "drunk" when I wrote "Munumguru," I might reply by quoting Disraeli—"It is much easier to be critical than be correct." Or Butler's "He could distinguish and divide a hair 'twixt south and south-west side." And since "J. D." is undeniably splitting hairs, he might at least have been correct in the hairs chosen for the operation. He opens by challenging me on the Gueré definition of the Christian year (and he spells "Christian," by the way, with a small C); he wants to know how a cannibal witch doctor would know the term "year," and if the witch doctor wouldn't have counted time by so many moons, etc. He then makes the point: "That he [the witch doctor] should know the exact second of twelve o'clock, when even the best-timed of clocks are a few fractions of a second off."

Now nowhere in the story did *Ga,* the witch doctor, voice the word "year." At no time in the story did the voodoo priest utter a single word in English. The story was explicit in saying that the jungle priest yelled in his native tongue, and that *Dr. Northgate,* the psychiatrist, *translated* his words. So many "moons," "sea-

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sons," "plantings" or what have you, would certainly be figured as "years" in an English translation. The French, for example, say "fourteen o'clock." Would it not be logical for an American, translating the speech of a French railway conductor to his friends, to say, "two P.M."?

As to the matter of "the exact second of twelve o'clock," that was pointed out as one of the tricks in the witch doctor's scheme. Had "J. D." been less occupied in tracking down hairs, he might have read the very answer to his criticism in the story itself. Apparently he's not a careful reader, for he overlooked the paragraph, "Midnight it must be. A minute before or a minute after will be too late. . . . Shades of Shakespeare, if I didn't see the trick then! The fly in that quack doctor's ointment.—Do you remember that beautiful piece of pettifogging in 'The Merchant of Venice'? '*One pound of flesh —not an atom more, not an atom less.*'—Well, this African cardinal had us on the same artifice. Exactly at midnight we must unearth his rotten totem, not a minute before, not a clock-tick after!"

The story goes on to say that the narrator is sunk because he realizes that he cannot tell the exact minute of midnight. At the very end of the yarn he wonders, "Did I get that Munumguru doll in time? Was I four minutes late when I clawed it from the ground?"

. . . Perhaps "J. D." will pardon me for not answering the last question in his letter. I can only assume that he did not finish the story, and I apologize for my failure to hold his interest.

THEODORE ROSCOE.

Of Interest to You!

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ESCAPE!

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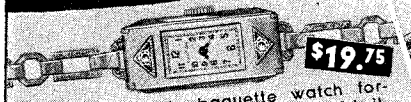

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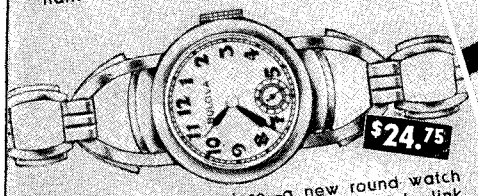

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